MY YOUTH ROMANTIC COMEDY IS WRONG, AS I EXPECTED

Wataru Watari

Illustration Ponkan⑧

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2 For some reason, **Iroha Isshiki** smells of danger.

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5 Right to the end, **Hayato Hayama** just can't understand it.

6 And so **Yui Yuigahama** declares.

7 Needless to say, **Komachi Hikigaya**'s kindness is there.

8 When the time is ripe, **Hachiman Hikigaya** makes his speech.

9 The room no longer **smells of tea**.

Translation Notes

Yukino
Yukinoshita

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VOLUME
8

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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MY YOUTH ROMANTIC COMEDY IS WRONG, AS I EXPECTED Vol. 8
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MY YOUTH ROMANTIC COMEDY IS WRONG, AS I EXPECTED

Eight

Cast of Characters

Hachiman Hikigaya..... The main character. High school second-year. Twisted personality.

Yukino Yukinoshita..... Captain of the Service Club. Perfectionist.

Yui Yuigahama..... Hachiman's classmate. Tends to worry about what other people think.

Yoshiteru Zaimokuza..... Nerd. Ambition is to become a light-novel author.

Saika Totsuka..... In tennis club. Very cute. A boy, though.

Saki Kawasaki..... Hachiman's classmate. Sort of a delinquent type.

Hayato Hayama..... Hachiman's classmate. Popular. In the soccer club.

Kakeru Tobe..... Hachiman's classmate. An excitable character and member of Hayama's clique.

Yumiko Miura..... Hachiman's classmate. Reigns over the girls in class as queen bee.

Hina Ebina..... Hachiman's classmate. Part of Miura's clique, but a slash fangirl.

Meguri Shiromeguri..... President of the student council. Third-year student.

Iroha Isshiki..... Manager of the soccer club. First-year student.

Shizuka Hiratsuka..... Japanese teacher. Guidance counselor.

Haruno Yukinoshita..... Yukino's older sister. In university.

Komachi Hikigaya..... Hachiman's little sister. In her third year in middle school.

Taishi Kawasaki..... Saki Kawasaki's little brother. In his third year in middle school.

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1

Needless to say, **Komachi Hikigaya**'s wrath is there.

Let's just say…

This is hypothetical.

If you could load only one old save file, like in a video game, to make new decisions, would that change your life?

The answer is no.

That route is only possible for people with choices. For those who never had a choice, this speculation is completely meaningless.

Therefore, I have no regrets.

Or to be more accurate, just about everything in my life is a regret.

And that's not even the real issue here.

It's too little, too late. If you start talking about what-ifs, you'll never stop, and it's not like any amount of talking will change things. Once you pick your option and settle on it, turning back is impossible.

What-ifs, parallel universes, and time loops do not exist. This is why, ultimately, the scenario of life is a linear corridor. Any discussion of possibility is fruitless.

I'm already well aware that I'm wrong. But the world is even more wrong.

The world creates all sorts of messes, like war, poverty, and discrimination, or when you don't get any job offers while you're looking for work, so you go into customer service. Then one day, the register count is off, and you're forced to commit seppuku. The experience is as common as grass.

Where is the righteousness in a world like that? In a world gone wrong, "right" isn't right.

Yet, when things are wrong, we call it truly right.

What point is there in extending the life of something you know full well will be lost?

Eventually, everything will be lost. That's just how it is.

But even so.

Sometimes that ephemerality gives birth to beauty.

These things are meaningful because they will one day come to an end. So then delay or obstruction of that end—"repose," you might call it—surely should not be overlooked or accepted.

You should be conscious of that inevitable loss.

I'm sure there is a joy in occasionally, quietly looking back on those precious things you've lost with nostalgia and affection as you tip a drink in their honor, alone.

X X X

It was an unpleasant morning.

The skies were a perfect clear blue, and a chilly wind gently rattled the windows. The air inside the room was the warm sort that invited you to nod off.

A really unpleasant morning.

It was the Monday after we'd returned from the school field trip.

Mondays always get me down. The lethargy was so strong, my body refused to move, but I forced it out of bed and headed for the washroom.

Eyes still full of sleep, I stared at the mirror and saw the same old familiar me.

…*Yep, same as always.*

Completely unchanged—to a boring degree.

The aversion to school, the desire to indulge in indolence forever, and the wave of homesickness as soon as I leave the house are all ordinary for me.

But the water I washed my face with felt a little colder than usual.

Fall had passed, and already it was fair to call the season winter. November was almost through, and there was only a little over a month left in the year.

My parents had left the house early in order to avoid rush hour. They said commuting traffic gets particularly bad at this time of year. I can't help thinking that winter mornings suck—even for adults. I'd prefer to loll around in my futon until the last minute.

But they have reasons why they still have to go to work.

I'm sure some people are internally motivated to do things they don't *have* to do. However, others base their actions on what society demands or what other people are doing. Some simply don't want to miss out.

When you get to the crux of the matter, people act to gain something or to avoid loss.

My face reflected in the mirror really was, even humbly speaking, more handsome than average, but my leaden eyes were most certainly not—they were varsity-level rotten.

That's me. This is what makes Hachiman Hikigaya.

Satisfied that I was an unchanging constant, I left the bathroom.

Stepping into the living room, I saw my little sister, Komachi, in the kitchen, standing imposingly in front of the teakettle. Our parents had already had breakfast, which was probably why the menu for the day was already laid out. Once Komachi poured the tea, the meal would be complete.

I pulled out a chair with a scrape, and right then, the water reached its boiling point. Komachi, pouring the hot water into the teapot, glanced at me. "Oh, morning, Bro."

"Yeah, morning." We exchanged our greetings.

And then she let out an "Ohhh," sounding a little impressed. "… You kinda look actually awake for once," she said.

I tilted my head questioningly. Was I normally not a morning person? No, I didn't even have to think about it—I am not a morning person. It's not like I have low blood pressure or anything—I have low motivation. So Komachi wasn't exactly incorrect in pointing this out. I was indeed awake that day.

"…Yeah, well, I washed my face with cold water." I tossed out the reason that came to mind, but Komachi gave me a doubtful look.

"Hmm… I think the water's the same as always, though."

"It's not like it got colder suddenly. Anyway, let's eat breakfast and get going to school."

"Yeah, okay." With her slippers pattering on the floor, Komachi brought over the tea. It seemed the family choice was not Ayataka

bottled tea but the kind of tea you brew in a pot.

We sat in our seats, put our hands together, and then quietly said our thanks for the food in unison.

During winter, the Hikigaya household breakfast often includes traditional foods like hot rice and miso soup. I guess the idea is to warm yourself up with miso soup before going out. Like a mom's love…or something.

I have a sensitive tongue, so I was blowing on my miso soup to cool it. Komachi was doing the same when my eyes met with hers across the table. She placed her bowl down and slowly began, "… Hey…"

"Hmm?" I made a short sound to show I was listening and prompted her to continue with a glance.

Komachi peered searchingly at me. "Did something happen?" she asked.

"Not at all… In fact, my whole life has been a whole lot of nothing, actually. People do say that anything can happen, though, so from that perspective, maybe it'd be good to have a little bit of something. Like how having a chronic disease makes you go to the doctor a lot, so you end up actually being healthier. Maybe that whole lot of nothing is creating a paradoxical turbulence in my life," I said, all in one breath.

Komachi blinked. "What's going on, Bro?"

That was blunt. Unexpectedly so.

Damn, she got straight to the point. I mean, I know everything I just said was nonsense, but isn't she gonna quip about any of it?

But I tried so hard on that and came up with a whole rant…

Maybe it really was the typical Monday blues, but I couldn't get into my groove. "Well, you know…my point is—nothing." I popped some fried egg into my mouth with my chopsticks. Are fried eggs considered Western cuisine or Japanese cuisine?

Komachi listened to my answer, then gave a weak "Hmm" in response. Then she slid her tray a little to the side, leaned forward over the table, and examined my face. "Hey, did you know?"

"What? Are you Mameshiba or something?"

Or maybe she's Hakoiri-Neko, since she's sheltered. Or no, she might be Rice Monster Pappu, since we're eating right now. There's no way she could be TapuTapu the Panda; Komachi isn't particularly tubby. She was leaning forward, a pose that should have emphasized her chest area, so perhaps that part could be a

little tubbier. No, no change necessary. She's supercute as is.

As I was nodding to myself about this, Komachi breathed a short sigh. "You're always full of crap, Bro, but when you're not doing well, you double down on it…"

"Oh. I do…?" Komachi was always a difficult judge to please. I couldn't argue with her accusation that I was full of crap. I really do only ever come up with nonsense. But that astute analysis of what I say and do—*Is she a psychological investigator or something? The hell is with this profiling?*

"Hey…" Poking at her salad with her chopsticks, Komachi paused as if she was chewing over what to say. The small tomato on her plate rolled around.

I could get a vague idea of what would come beyond that pause —was it because we were siblings? Or was it because I'd come to that same thought?

Komachi set her chopsticks down and examined me. "Did something happen…with Yui and Yukino?"

As she asked me that question, I was silently spooning food into my mouth; I'd been raised not to talk with my mouth full. I drank my miso soup slowly, swallowing down various feelings along with it. "…Did they say something?" I asked.

"No." Komachi slowly shook her head. "They wouldn't bring up stuff like that. You know that, don't you, Bro?" she said, and I had no reply for her. Yukinoshita and Yuigahama will never shut up when it comes to trivial things, but they wouldn't suddenly come to my sister to gossip. "I just had a guess," she said, looking over to see my reaction.

Since we live together, she notices things, both good and bad, but there are some things I don't want her realizing.

"Huh." I replied with a basically meaningless noise and glanced over at the wall clock. Then I continued my meal with more enthusiasm.

But Komachi was keeping a more leisurely pace. "Make sure you actually chew. And…" It seemed she meant to keep going but was taking her time, because she could tell I was trying to end the conversation. She looked off in the other direction as if remembering something. "Something like this happened before, right?"

"Did it?" Even as I said that, I was clearly aware Komachi had to be talking about the incident from June. I think she'd pointed it

out in the same way back then, too.

Hey, things haven't changed at all. As expected of me.

No growth, or change, or anything.

Komachi squeezed her teacup as if warming her hands. Though I doubted there would be any tea stems floating to the surface, her eyes were pointed down at the liquid. "…But it seems a little different from last time."

"Well, of course. People change every day. Your cells die and renew. Apparently, they're all replaced every five or seven years or something. So it's like, people are—"

"Yeah, yeah." Komachi casually ignored me with an exasperated smile, then suddenly released her cup. It looked like her hands were on her lap. "…So what did you do?"

"I'm a little offended by that assumption," I replied.

But Komachi simply stayed silent, looking into my eyes. With her focused gaze trained on me, I really doubted I could evade her by saying something stupid again.

I found myself aggressively scratching my head and looking away. "…It's nothing. Because there never was anything."

Komachi sighed. "Maybe you just don't know you're doing it, Bro. Oh, guess I have no choice… C'mon and tell me about it already!"

"I dunno…"

I'd been thinking about what happened this whole time.

It had only been a few days since we'd come back from Kyoto, but it *had* been on my mind. I'd been replaying my actions in my mind, wondering if I'd made a mistake somewhere or if there'd been some other problem.

But all that ever came of my pondering was the conclusion that I'd chosen the most efficient, reliable, and safe route. I believe with the limited time and few cards available, I'd managed to come up with fair results. I'd avoided the worst possible outcome, and I'd managed to fulfill the other request made of me, too. I couldn't say for sure if they justified the means, but the end results were there.

But there was no need to explain that to Komachi in detail. As long as I understood, that was enough.

"It really is nothing." I gave a lighthearted shrug. And then, as if to declare this conversation was now over, I went straight to bolting down the rest of my food.

But Komachi wouldn't let the matter go.

“Oh, you. So what happened?” She tilted her head slightly, leaned her cheek on her hand, and gave a silly smile.

Her gestures were cutesy, but I could sense her determination. She wasn’t going to let me equivocate my way out of this one.

But I really was sick of this.

Normally, I wouldn’t feel irritated by Komachi’s prying. I’m sure I normally would’ve let it go with a smile or dodged it with some clever comment. However, if things had been normal in the first place, then Komachi wouldn’t have been pestering me so persistently, would she? It was as if the universe was forcing me to acknowledge the conscious effort I was putting into pretending this was all the same as usual. How aggravating.

“…You’re being really nosy. Get off my ass.”

“…”

I didn’t mean to say it that harshly, and it struck Komachi silent. But she only froze for an instant before her shoulders started trembling. Her eyes flared open wide as she shouted back at me. “Wh-why do you have to be like that?!”

“It’s a normal reaction. You’ve been way too nosy, and it’s annoying.” I’m sure that wasn’t what I should have said. There would have been any number of ways to avoid this outcome. But even so, once the words are out, you can’t take them back.

There’s no such thing as take-backs.

Komachi narrowed her eyes in a glare, but eventually, her gaze quietly dropped away. “…Hmph. Okay. Fine. I won’t ask again.”

“Good.”

And that ended all conversation at the breakfast table.

We both continued our meal in silence, and time seemed to freeze for us, passing incredibly slowly.

It wasn’t long before Komachi gulped down her miso soup and stood. There was some rattling as she swept together the tableware and bundled it to the sink. Then she pattered off to the door and stopped. Standing there, without looking at me, she said quickly, “Komachi’s leaving now. Lock the door.”

“Uh-huh,” I replied briefly, and Komachi slammed the door. Right as she did, I could hear her murmur to herself. “…I knew it. Something did happen.”

Left behind alone in the living room, I reached out to my tea. It had already cooled, and when I put my lips to the cup, the liquid was tepid.

It felt like it had been years since I'd last quarreled with Komachi like that. *Guess it's late to be noticing this, but I must've made her angry, huh…?* I thought, a little worried.

Komachi rarely gets angry, but when she does, she holds on to it. What's more, she was also quite definitely smack-dab in the middle of puberty. I didn't know how she might look at me when she came back.

This is what I get, even with my own sister.

It truly is difficult to get along with people.

X X X

Autumn was well underway on my route to school.

The leaves of the trees that stood along the cycling course beside the Hanamigawa River were changing color or falling. The sky was clear, and the sea breeze was blowing air so dry, it was as if it had forgotten the humidity of summer.

Though gradually, the seasons were clearly changing. The visual transformation between summer and fall is particularly apparent, and in late fall, you can see the colors of winter.

This past string of seasons had been filled with perhaps the most varied changes.

Autumn has deepened
and I think of my neighbors.
What are they up to?

It's a famous haiku.

It may be that curiosity about the actions of neighbors is rooted in the particular sorrow and dreariness of the season, or it may be from a touch of loneliness. That lonesomeness makes you interested in others, and the desire to stop that isolation turns your attention to the existence of other people. Seen from another angle, this could be interpreted as an expression of your desire for their attention.

They say the other is the mirror that reflects the self. Basically, all others are nothing more than false images seen through the filter that is the self, and therefore, all that exists is the self.

Ultimately, people only ever think about themselves.

The act of questioning what the neighbors are doing is merely a comparison of the self against others, a way to know where you

stand by way of the question *So then what about me?*

Using others to substantiate yourself is lacking in sincerity. That's the wrong way of pursuing the self.

Therefore, isolation is righteous, and isolation is correct.

I rattled along on my bicycle. It occasionally made some rusty squeaks, but I ignored that and pedaled away. At around this time, I wouldn't be late—I'd make it to the classroom before the bell could ring, at least.

This was the time I normally came to school.

As I went into the bicycle parking, I heard pattering feet as a smattering of people rushed off. I parked my bicycle and hurried to the entrance like everyone else. Loners walk rather fast. It's one of the skills you gain when you don't often walk with other people. At the rate I'm currently mastering it, I might make the Japan national team for racewalking in the Tokyo Olympics. Or not.

The school entrance had a cheery air and the usual scene; it was a hubbub of good mornings and chatter spreading out over the stairs and into the hallway. After the major event of the school field trip, it seemed the same old ordinary school days were back.

When I went into the classroom, it was the same there, too.

I moved through the harmonious chatter without making a sound, between people and desks, going to my own seat to slide out my chair. I took a seat and waited for morning homeroom to start.

Though I was zoning out, my ears and eyes gathered information on their own. Seeing my classmates' lack of reaction to me, I figured my fake confession the other day had not become public. Well, of course. It was common sense that nobody would spread it around. It wasn't something Tobe, Ebina, or Hayama would enjoy having people know about.

The vibe in the class hadn't changed, either. In fact, I felt like it was actually better than before.

It wasn't that getting through this event had deepened their ties—I think it was the limited time making them like that.

Going to chilly Kyoto and feeling the change of the seasons, they'd finished one of the most major events in high school. Everyone had probably come to terms with that.

November would soon be over. Once we get into the latter half of December, there's winter break and New Year's sandwiched between then and January. Then there's February, which is shorter, and then March, where spring break awaits, and moment by

moment, time is being lost. We had only about three months of time left to spend in class.

That was what made my classmates value it. But for whose sake? It's not for their friends.

It's their youth they cling to. They hold on to their own time, to the space and time flowing around and through them. It's like a sort of narcissism.

As I was making my arbitrary observations and arbitrary analysis, coming to arbitrary conclusions, a quiet yawn slipped from my mouth. Thinking about nonsense is proof that I'm tired.

Though we were only just out of the weekend, I felt like a sluggish weight still remained in my body. I slowly rotated my neck to loosen the stiffness in my shoulders.

My field of vision was full of the ever-familiar faces of my classmates, the people chattering away loudly. Ignoring them, I saw a certain ponytailed girl looking out the window.

Even in the restlessness of the classroom, Kawasaki remained herself, unchanged from before.

Looking farther to the front, there were some girls in a little clump, showing photos to one another. The one in the middle of the circle gleefully babbling away had to be Sagami. Considering all that had happened, she hadn't grown much compared with before, which makes her a rather rare type, I think. Well, I'll never be involved with her again, so who cares? Perhaps the school field trip had had some positive effects, as I couldn't hear any backbiting from her.

Unsurprisingly, it wasn't only Sagami and her friends talking about the field trip—the topic came up in conversations all over the classroom.

But what they discussed now would eventually turn into more memories, sinking to the bottom of their minds. Then this would change form, becoming a moment spent looking at photos or reflecting on the past. And I'm sure that was true not only for the school field trip but also for the time they spent right now.

I doubt many were aware of this. Or maybe they realized it unconsciously, and that was why they put on a false cheer, so they could enjoy themselves. I'm sure they would all eventually come to pretend not to notice, act like they'd never seen it.

So then maybe it was the same for them, too.

I turned my head around further to steal a glance at the back of

the class.

The scene there was equally unchanged.

“So we came back to Chiba, right? And, like, the Keiyo Line was already all Christmassy, and I was like, *Whoa*! The Destiny Land ads were right in your face,” Tobe said in a lighthearted tone as he tugged at the overlong hair at the back of his head. He seemed to be enjoying himself with the others of the clique, just as he had before the field trip.

“Destiny Land’s going all out.”

“I know, man.”

Ooka and Yamato carelessly joined in on the conversation with the same casual vibe as Tobe.

“…Destiny Land, huh?” Miura said rather vacantly as she twirled her wide blonde sausage rolls around her finger. If Miura was attracted to Destiny Princess stuff, that was actually kinda girlish and sweet. In my opinion.

“It’s already that time, huh?” A smile wafted across Hayama’s face as he leaned his cheek on his hand.

Yuigahama, who’d been listening, touched her pointer finger to her jaw, looked up at the ceiling, hummed in thought, and said, “Oh, that reminds me. I think they got some kind of new attraction a little while ago.”

Ebina folded her arms pensively. “Huh? Wasn’t that in Destiny Sea? Sometimes I don’t even know which is which anymore… Which one tops?”

“Camouflage, Ebina.” Miura smacked Ebina on the head, and a smile slipped onto my face.

Hayama’s clique was the same as ever. That was a slight relief.

The world wished for things to be unchanging, to stay at a standstill.

Maybe that would eventually simply turn to obstruction and decay, but this world was obstructed and decaying to begin with. So all’s as it should be.

Hayama and Ebina didn’t come to interfere with my business, either.

That was an extremely correct choice. If they were to act as if nothing had happened, then they had to react to me just as they had before the field trip. Then the distance between us would remain constant.

As I was staring at them somewhat vacantly, suddenly, my gaze

met Yuigahama's.

"…"

"…"

It couldn't have been much, not even a few seconds of eye contact. But it felt strangely long. The way our eyes sort of searched each other was uncomfortable, and I immediately looked away. I let my body weight lean on my head, supported by my left arm, and closed my eyes as if I were taking a nap. But even after I averted my eyes, my ears kept working.

"So, hey. Like, all of us going to Destiny Land or something? Yeah, man!"

"For sure."

"Yeah."

It seemed there was no actual content in this conversation, yet it would not end. But Yuigahama's laughter was a part of it, at least, and that made me breathe a sigh of relief.

…Their conversations really are so void of content, though. It's all about the vibe with them. Worthless.

Though maybe they were all just avoiding touching the core of things. It's very possible that this inoffensive conversation was a way of acting out normalcy.

But anyway, how beautiful it is to have good friends, I guess. Facades are so lovely. Of course they are—that's the entire point of glossing over everything else.

Therefore, the incredibly basic equation of friendship = beauty = facade holds valid. I really do have a sense for math. Which reminds me, apparently some sciencey types say completed equations are beautiful. I can get that. There's a sense of security in the truth of an unchangeable and definite fact. But still, getting worked up over numerical expressions is a sign of a perverse attraction to science. Yikes. Science and math types really are creepy.

As I was killing time considering these trivial matters, I opened my eyes and glanced over at the clock. *Guess the bell is gonna ring soon…*

A figure rushed to the classroom barely on time, steps hurried but light. The door timidly slid open, and Totsuka, in his gym clothes, peeked his face in. He quietly checked inside, then breathed a deep sigh. He wiped some sweat off himself and glanced at the clock. "Phew, I made it…," he muttered, seeming relieved, and then

headed to his desk, exchanging greetings with his classmates on the way.

In passing, he noticed me and walked up to me, where I'd been watching the whole time. You might question why I'd been watching the whole time, to which I will ask in return, Who *wouldn't* be?

He must have come running, as he was panting hard, cheeks flushed. His eyes looked somewhat moist, perhaps out of tiredness from morning practice.

"Morning, Hachiman."

I lightly cleared my throat to avoid getting too worked up, then returned his greeting. But if I was too calm, it wouldn't be like me. "…Yeah, morning." I managed the perfectly modulated tone.

But Totsuka gave me a blank look of silent confusion. His casually raised hand stopped in position. "…"

"What is it?" I asked.

He waved his hand and beamed a smile as if to distract me from his silence. "Oh, no, I was just thinking, *Huh, that's a normal greeting*."

"…" His statement made me reflect on my recent response. Had something about it been different from usual?

But it seemed additional pondering would not bring an immediate answer. I abandoned thinking about it and said, "Yeah… well, I guess. It's normal. Did you have morning practice, Totsuka?"

"Yeah. I haven't gone in a long time, so I went a little too hard. Oh, have you recovered from the field trip, Hachiman?" he said.

I recalled the trip back from Kyoto. I'd spent most of the time on the return Shinkansen sleeping. That must have been what he was talking about. Well, I'd actually been awake for about half of it, but I just hadn't felt like talking to people… Um, besides, you know, I hadn't been in a great mood, and I don't want Totsuka seeing me like that, right? It's like, I always want to be the cool Hachiman Hikigaya in front of Totsuka. What the heck am I saying?

"Yeah, I'm all good now."

"Oh, that's great." Totsuka smiled back at me, and that was right when the bell rang. He raised his hand a little, then went to his seat. I sent him off with a warm smile.

Yes, no more exhaustion for me. Not after that anyway.

X X X

With each class that came to a close, my body felt heavier and heavier. Automatically, I counted the hours left until school was over.

And then when day-end homeroom was over, that countdown ended, too.

I was out of time.

Taking my mostly empty bag in hand, I got to my feet. I left the classroom before everyone else who would be going to their clubs or returning home like me. I felt eyes on me from somewhere, but that gaze was cut off when I closed the door behind me.

A relaxed air flowed through the hallway. All the kids coming and going must have had places to be. Though their steps were slow, they never stopped.

I chose to walk along the edge of the hallway, out of the light of the sun, where the temperature felt a little cooler.

The crowds were thinner than usual when I descended the stairs. Some classes were probably still in day-end homeroom. Nobody called out to me or questioned me as I headed for the entrance, and I arrived without issue. There, I changed into my outdoor shoes and went to the bicycle parking lot. If I were to unlock my bicycle, a bit of pedaling would take me home even if my mind wandered somewhere else.

But that wouldn't be like me.

I am me. The same as usual. So then I should spend my time the same way I had before.

The vending machine installed right in front of the school entrance caught my eye.

Let's cheer myself up. I chose a canned coffee. Yet again, Ayataka tea was not my choice.

"…This is bitter." I drank it down in one go and tossed the empty can into the trash. The bitterness spread through my whole mouth, and even once I was walking again, it still lingered.

My legs still felt heavy, but I forced them to walk, heading to the clubroom via a different route from how I'd gone before. As I walked along the hallways and climbed the stairs, I found myself thinking too much. Each thought drew a slow sigh from me.

And then, after a long time, I finally arrived in front of the

clubroom.

Before I put my hand to the door, I took a deep breath.

I heard people talking inside. It was hard to hear their voices through the door, but it seemed the girls were there.

Now that I'd ascertained as much, I slid the door open all the way.

The talking stopped.

"…"

All three of us fell silent. Yukinoshita and Yuigahama looked at me, surprised. Did they think that since I was later than usual today, I wouldn't come? Half-right. I wasn't exactly feeling a proactive desire to come.

I was just being stubborn. It was a piddling stubbornness, spiteful and contrary, worn out and basically worthless.

It was my personal, tiny attempt to hold on to my past, my actions, and my convictions.

I dipped my head in a small greeting nod and proceeded to my usual position.

I pulled out the chair and sat, then took my current book out of my bag. The bookmark was in the same position it had been before the field trip.

Once I started reading, finally, time started again.

On the table there was a quilted tea cozy, baked sweets and chocolate, and a teacup and mug with steam wafting off both. The room was warm, perhaps because they'd boiled water, and it smelled like black tea. But it felt as if that temperature was dropping.

Yukinoshita's cold gaze shot through me. "…You're here."

"Yeah, guess I am." I replied with a nonanswer, turning a page I'd not yet read more than half of. After that, Yukinoshita didn't say anything.

Yuigahama glanced over at me, too, but she merely twisted her mouth in a glum expression and then put those lips to her mug. But she did communicate to me with her body language. She was asking me why I'd come.

The accusatory silence went on.

I continued to follow the lines of words with my eyes. I leaned back in my chair, let my shoulders relax, and turned the pages of the paperback. It was an unproductive span of time, as I unconsciously counted the remaining pages of the book and the

hours until I could go home.

There was the sound of a clearing throat, the sound of clothing rustling, the sound of a fidgeting leg.

Eventually, I heard the click of the long hand of the clock moving.

As if taking that as her cue, Yuigahama sucked in a little breath. “Oh, so yeah, everyone’s been pretty normal. Um, uh…everyone…,” she said, but she must have felt overwhelmed by the frigid chill in the room, as she gradually trailed off. But Yukinoshita and I were both giving her our attention.

By *everyone*, she must have meant Ebina, Tobe, Hayama, and Miura and the rest of them.

And indeed, even after the field trip, their clique hadn’t changed. It looked to me as if they were still spending their time as friends, trying to get along, like always.

“…Yeah, from what I could see, it seems like they’re none the worse.” No, I wasn’t proud of what I’d done. You could probably count it as the worst kind of way to handle things. But still, it hadn’t been for nothing, so there was a silver lining. So I’d say that was my honest opinion.

“…I see. Well then, that’s good,” Yukinoshita said, tracing the rim of her teacup. But nothing about her expression seemed to think so, and her somber gaze was pointed at the tea in her cup.

Yuigahama’s smile brightened as she patted her bun, apparently encouraged by her success in starting a conversation. “Man, I was so anxious about it, but it’s like, I didn’t even have to worry! Everyone’s totally…normal.” But she couldn’t maintain the energy. Her head drooped, and her last mumbled word had a somehow empty ring to it. “…I don’t really know what everyone’s thinking anymore.”

Who was that remark directed at? Realizing *everyone* meant more than Hayama’s clique, I found myself startled.

When I failed to react, Yukinoshita said, “…Well, it’s not as if you would ever have understood what everyone is thinking in the first place.” Her cold manner of speaking made Yuigahama choke up, and she fell silent again. The mug in her hands was no longer steaming.

With a pained look at Yuigahama, Yukinoshita continued, “Besides…even if you know each other, whether you can understand each other is something else.” Yukinoshita reached out

for her teacup, head listing downward. She drank her tea, which I'm sure was cold by now, and then oh-so-quietly laid her cup on the saucer. As if she wanted to avoid making any noise at all.

The silence asked me the meaning of what she'd said.

"…Yeah." Upon consideration, that was clear. Yukinoshita was utterly correct, and there was no fault to be found in her words. It was completely true.

I breathed a short sigh and pulled myself together. "Well, there's no use worrying about it so much. I think it's best for us to act normally, too." If you want things to remain the same as before, then your surroundings have to stay that way, too. Connections between people can easily be cut—not only by internal causes but external ones, too.

Yuigahama slowly repeated what I'd said. "Us acting normal, too… Yeah…" She gave a tiny nod as if she was trying to tell herself that, though it didn't look like it would work at all. I nodded to her in reply.

This was our choice.

No, it was my choice.

Only one person, Yukino Yukinoshita, did not approve, and she was looking straight at me. Overwhelming me with her glare, she slowly said, "Normal, hmm? …Yes, this is what's normal to you, isn't it?"

"…Yeah," I replied.

Yukinoshita breathed a little sigh. "…So you're saying you won't change."

I got the feeling she'd said something like that before. But it meant something completely different now from what it had then. Her words were without warmth, resigned, like it was over.

That stung.

"Do you…um…?" Yukinoshita stopped there as if it was too hard to say. Her eyes shifted as if searching for words.

Oh. This has got to be a continuation of the last time.

She was going to say the words she'd swallowed then.

I'd unconsciously braced myself for it, so I forced myself to relax and waited for Yukinoshita to talk. She was gripping her skirt. Her shoulders were trembling slightly. And then, as if she'd made up her mind, her throat bobbed in a swallow.

But the words never came out.

"Y-Yukinon! U-um, listen…," Yuigahama started to say, then

stopped and clunked her mug down hard on her desk. It was as if she'd sensed Yukinoshita shouldn't say anything further.

But that was merely to delay the inevitable, pretending she couldn't see it, burying it quietly and secretly out in the yard. The tension did not relax, and as the girls tried to find something to say, they only created a silence.

Just how long did this go on? It couldn't have been that long. The only thing moving was the second hand of the clock.

But I was made aware of the time when a light knock came on the door. Our eyes all turned toward it, but nobody spoke.

Then there was another knock, another attempt.

"Come in," I answered. I didn't speak all that loudly, but it seemed my voice reached the door anyway.

The door rattled as it was shoved open. "Pardon me," said Miss Hiratsuka as she entered the room.

2

For some reason, **Iroha Isshiki** smells of danger.

A wind blew in through the open door, rustling through Miss Hiratsuka's long, glossy black hair. She swept the stray strands aside with some annoyance, then came inside, heels clicking on the floor. "There's something I'd like to ask you kids, but…," she said, gaze sweeping over us. Immediately, she tilted her head with a *hmm*. "Did something happen?" she asked, but nobody could reply. Yuigahama turned her face aside awkwardly, while Yukinoshita sat with her eyes closed and expression composed, not even twitching.

This created a weird pause, and Miss Hiratsuka tilted her head again before turning a questioning look at me.

"No, it's fine." I'm not really strong enough to be able to ignore a direct look, so I made an effort to reply calmly.

I'd meant to speak briefly, but Miss Hiratsuka smiled wryly, seemingly having clued in on something regardless. Well, with Yukinoshita and Yuigahama both clamming up, it was obvious to anyone that something was going on.

"Maybe I should come back later."

"Well, that'd be all right." *It won't make a difference*, I implied wordlessly. It seemed likely this deadlock would continue tomorrow, and the day after that, too.

"…I see." Miss Hiratsuka seemed to figure out what I was stabbing at, as she shrugged her shoulders and breathed a short sigh.

Sensitive to the gloomy cloud that once again hung over us, Yuigahama asked, "Did you need something, Miss Hiratsuka?"

"Yes, I do… You can come in," Miss Hiratsuka called out to the door, and with a pleasantly chirpy "Pardon me" and soft footsteps,

someone I recognized came into view. Her hair was in braids, a pin was attached to her bangs, and her forehead was cute and smooth. This was Meguri, one year older than us and president of the student council. And behind her stood another girl, an unfamiliar one.

"There's something I wanted to talk to you guys about…," Meguri started, turning back to the girl behind her.

She took one step forward, and her shoulder-length light-brown hair swayed. It seemed that was her natural color—perhaps the flecks of sunset light dancing across it was due to her cuticles. Her fluffy hair and big, round eyes were cute and puppylike. She wore her uniform in a very slightly casual manner, demurely squeezing the sleeves of her loose, oversized cardigan.

Who's this? I thought, looking at her, and she smiled shyly.

Instantly, that stirred ripples of unrest in my heart. It wasn't love at first sight, of course. It was a simple warning bell.

"Oh, Iroha-chan," Yuigahama said.

"Iroha-chan" replied pleasantly, tilting her head daintily. "Hello, Yui."

"Yahallo!" They both waved their hands in small motions in front of their chests.

"Oh, so you've met Isshiki. Then I suppose I don't have to introduce her," Meguri said, nodding.

Iroha Isshiki.

I'd heard that name before.

I recalled that she was the soccer team manager and a first-year. Back during the judo tournament, that weird little event we'd held before summer vacation, she'd come to fangirl over Hayama. *Which reminds me, what happened with Miura after that…?*

This wasn't the time to be musing about the past.

It seemed whatever they'd come to discuss was connected to Iroha Isshiki. But then why was Meguri with them, too?

I looked at Meguri in search of an explanation, and she nodded back at me and said, "Did you know student council elections are coming up?"

Her question rang no bells with me. As long as it wasn't compulsory to take part in planning it, my involvement in school functions was fairly low. Without moving my head, I checked the others' reactions with a shift of my eyes. Yuigahama quietly shook her head.

Well, it wasn't a very exciting event. If you had friends or acquaintances running, then I'm sure it'd be different, but I figured your typical student more often than not wouldn't be involved with student council. The general student body would perceive the student council as *Some people who do stuff. I don't really know what.* So it'd be about the same for the elections for choosing the student council. I would have thought that way, too, if I hadn't helped out before with the cultural and athletic festivals. I figured Yuigahama would think the same way.

But one person here was different—Yukinoshita.

"Yes. It's already been announced, hasn't it? As have the candidates, I believe."

"I knew you'd know, Yukinoshita! That's right, they've all been announced already. Except for the clerk, since no one decided to run." Meguri gave a pleased little bit of applause. "It actually should have been done a little earlier, but we couldn't get the candidates, so we extended the deadline. We have to make sure there's a successor for me, or I can't retire…" Meguri made a comically fake sob.

"The faculty always winds up leaning on Shiromeguri. Normally, we'd have liked to find the next one around the time of the athletic festival, but…" Miss Hiratsuka gave Meguri a worried look, but Meguri smiled and waved her hands.

"Oh, no, it's totally fine! I've already gotten a recommendation for my choice school, so it won't affect my entrance exams."

Thinking about it now, it was obvious, but Meguri was a third-year. She would be graduating in a few months.

As I gazed at her, thinking that soon I'd be getting my last look

at this fluffy Megurin and the atmosphere around her, she seemed to realize that they were still in the middle of explaining things. “Ah! Oh yes, yes, I’ve got to explain. So as my last task, I’m running the election management committee with all the current council members.”

So that meant none of the current student council would be running in this election?

Well, the current student council must have found the work meaningful because they’d been working with Meguri. They did seem to be pretty devoted to her. Either that, or after going through the cultural and sports festivals with us, they’d ended up feeling like *I’ve had enough of the student council!* (as the camera does an iris out).

“So we’ve made it to candidate disclosure, but…”

“Disclosure…,” Yuigahama muttered quietly, but nobody explained it for her. Normally, Yukinoshita would have done so immediately, but she had her hand on her chin, seemingly lost in thought.

Miss Hiratsuka couldn’t let this pass unnoticed. “As it pertains to our school, it’s basically to disclose the announcement of the election schedule and candidates.”

Yuigahama laughed to cover her embarrassment and thanked her. “Th-thank you. Ah-ha-ha… U-um, and so what about that… disclosure?” she asked, trying to change the subject.

Meguri glanced over at Isshiki. “Isshiki is running for student council president.”

Oh-ho, so this one’s running, huh…? It may have sounded mean to call this surprising, but Iroha Isshiki did not look at all the type to be interested in student council.

Wondering what was in this for her, I gave her a hard look. She seemed to notice my gaze and blinked at me. Apparently, she hadn’t even been aware that I was there. *Hey, but you looked over here before, didn’t you? Did you think I was an ornament or something? Is there any club that would set up such a novel totem pole?*

But Isshiki didn’t show any particular disgust toward me. In fact, she put her hand to her mouth with a smile, as if something had just occurred to her. “Oh, were you just thinking I’m not cut out for it?”

“Uh, no, not really. Nothing like that.” Her smile made me stumble. Well, you can’t judge people on appearances, and

dismissing an anime based on character designs is foolish. In order to discard my preconceptions, I surreptitiously averted my eyes from Isshiki.

She seemed quite miffed about that, putting a hand to her hip with a sullen look as she leaned forward to continue talking. “I get that a lot, so I get it, you know. People think I’m ditzy and slow…”

Oh, this is a bad one.

Though she gave the appearance of being a fluffy, pleasant type, she had her youthfulness on at full blast, with a firm grasp on what it was to be a modern high school girl. Her skirt was a little over knee-length, her makeup was light with an aim for a natural look, the arms of her cream-colored cardigan were a tad too long, and the ribbon at her collar was tied loose enough that her collarbone might or might not peek out, giving her an edge of vulnerability. And though she came off as all sweet, she was also overly familiar—or maybe *affable* is a better word—to engender a warmer relationship with older girls like Yuigahama, too.

…Yeah. She’s dangerous.

She is *the* high school girl—used to attention and playing the character people want from her. That open display of a gentle nature and slightly reserved femininity reminds you that it’s contrived, prevents you from peeking behind it.

Based off my past experiences, I know this type is highly likely to be a minefield.

Just as those who like to describe themselves as *real* or *savage* are really insensitive human garbage, those who go out of their way to define themselves even though nobody ever asked are generally good-for-nothings. Self-professed ditzy types are more of the same.

While I’m at it, the sort of idiot who inexplicably declares *I’m a real funny guy* also fits into this category. These self-professed *funny guys* will go, like, *Heyoooo* or something, half laughing as they smack you in the back of the head, and the way they’ll smirk and quote some stupid TV show when you’re just having a conversation is really annoying. These morons who like to pretend they’re comedians are particularly obnoxious. They often mistakenly believe that messing with people makes them *so* funny, but a defining trait of this type is that when other people mess with *them*, they get angry for real.

What is this useless extra explanation?

Well. In other words. My impression of Iroha Isshiki was kind of

false and chilly.

But it seemed none of the others particularly saw her that way. *Well, I suppose I'm overreacting.*

"…So do you have some issue?" Yukinoshita, who had been silently listening to Isshiki talk, unfolded her arms to slowly lay them on the desk. She must have been impatient, and something about her tone told me she was irritated.

Upon realizing they had yet to get to the point of this conversation, Meguri hurriedly added, "Isshiki has announced her candidacy, but…well, um…how should I put this? …She wants to make it so that she doesn't get elected." Meguri must have been at a loss as to how to explain this, as her manner of speaking was a little vague.

I considered the meaning of someone announcing their candidacy without wanting to win. "Agh… Basically, you want us to make you lose the election?" I asked. This was the natural conclusion to reach.

Meguri nodded.

Yuigahama, who'd been listening, went "Hmm?" as she tilted her head in confusion. "Um…does that mean you don't want to be the student council president?"

"Oh yeah. That's right." Being acquainted with Yuigahama must have made Isshiki feel at ease with her, as she replied casually, without any shyness. But watching, I got a bad feeling. Even if there was some reason for this situation, at the very least, hers was not the right attitude for someone who had announced their candidacy for student council president.

"…So why run?"

Isshiki flinched at Yukinoshita's critical tone. "Ummmm, I didn't make myself a candidate. Some people nominated me without asking…," she said, acting embarrassed and shy about it for some reason, and I couldn't hide my apathy toward her situation.

The hell? What kind of pop-idol story is this?

But it seemed Isshiki wasn't paying attention to my gaze—or rather, she wasn't paying attention to me at all as she put a finger to her cheek, humming in a pensive manner. "I kinda stand out in a bad way, I guess? I get a lot of that stuff. Since I'm the manager of the soccer club, and I'm friends with Hayama and the older guys, I guess I've ended up making people think I'm the type, sooo lots of people say I'd be good at that?"

She was being really vague, but I made my best effort to understand. There was only one thing she said that I was somewhat curious about. "…So they bullied you into it?"

"It's not like that. It just sort of happened, like they got carried away? A bunch of my friends in the class got together and were joking around, I guess." As Isshiki spoke, she stuck up her pointer finger and put it to her chin, tilting her head. The way she drawled and made everything sound like a question was starting to make my head hurt.

So basically, what's she trying to say…?

"So I really think this time was something like that, too?"

Okay. I don't get it.

I didn't get it, but basically, I figured it was like, *I'm the Class Clown and I Somehow Got Roped Into Being the Student Council President!*

Superlong titles aren't in style anymore, though, so forget it…

It's a common enough story, letting a situation spiral out of control because you weren't using your head. Apparently, this was another mistake due to one's youth, too.

But you know.

…She really seemed like the type who girls would hate.

I got that. I could understand that.

It was like, you know.

A sweet-acting bitch in airhead's clothing. A gentle and pure bitch. There were girls like that in my middle school, too, and they always had boys wrapped around their little fingers. Boys aren't jewelry, okay? Even Grander Musashi doesn't get bites like that on the first cast. They fished up so many, it was like, *What kind of lures are you using?*

So even if things had reached this point because her class got carried away, I'm sure there was plenty of malice involved.

"Wait, are you allowed to nominate someone without permission?" Yuigahama asked, lightly raising her hand.

Miss Hiratsuka folded her arms and breathed a short sigh. "When the paperwork was submitted, she didn't check it herself."

"Urk… If we had been a little more thorough…we might've… we just…" Meguri moaned in shame.

By *we*, she must have meant the election management committee, not that old Nintendo console.

Miss Hiratsuka patted the drooping Meguri on the shoulder.

“Well, nobody thought anyone would do something like this as a prank. I think it would be a little harsh to blame the election management committee.”

“I did make sure to check the nominator register, though,” Meguri said despondently.

There was an unfamiliar term in there, so I asked back, “Nominator register?”

“Yes, when announcing candidacy, you need a list of your nominators, and we do check those references.”

So first you need nominations, huh?

But that made sense. It’d be an issue if someone who wasn’t popular was suddenly like, *I’m gonna be the president!* They’d probably established that system in order to cut out the chaff ahead of time. So then this would be a necessary condition to accept a candidate. Or to put it the other way, this meant as long as you had that list, you could run.

The current student council were all there because they wanted to be, so they must not have thought anyone would submit those documents with such mischievous ends. Sometimes you’ll encounter people out there who are stupider than you’d ever imagined. It’s a scary thing.

“That’s quite involved for a prank, though. I thought it required at least thirty recommendations in order to nominate a candidate,” Yukinoshita said, her tone grave. It seemed I wasn’t the only horrified one here.

“That many? I’m impressed they got them all…,” Yuigahama commented, half-exasperated and half-horrified.

But it wasn’t anything particularly amazing.

It’s simply easier to unite people with malice rather than goodwill. And if their idea was to rake Isshiki over the coals because they believed she was getting full of herself, then all the more so. Those people would have written their names down with the casual ease of a retweet. It’s like the malicious version of slacktivism.

While I was groaning internally, Miss Hiratsuka’s expression turned a little more serious. “Of course, I will be speaking with the kids who pulled this. Call it fortunate or what, the signatures of the thirty nominators were real.”

“They wrote their real names on it? Idiots…,” I muttered.

“They must not have thought it would be a big deal. No

imaginations," Miss Hiratsuka said with a wry smile.

Well, fair enough. There's a lot of that going around lately. Like people who upload photos of themselves inside their workplace fridges or being dicks at a restaurant onto Twitter. Exposing your real name and a photo of your face on the Internet and bragging about your crimes, it's like, *Why are you putting up a wanted poster for yourself?*

"Um, can't you invalidate it? Isn't there anything you can do to drop out of the running?" Yuigahama said, and Isshiki readily took a step forward.

Earnestly, she said, "About that…my homeroom teacher kinda got on board with the idea and has been really pushing me to go along with it? When I said I wasn't going to do it, the pressure just got worse… Like, wouldn't you understand when no one in the class is willing to do the campaign speech? And it's like, what's support from the teacher gonna do, right?"

Oh, so that's what's going on. That thing when you say you're gonna quit your job, and you get this passionate attempt from the manager to stop you. They go so hard, it's like they can't stand to be short one person, and they get all passionate and extra kind as they try to put a positive spin on it and persuade you in so many ways, like, *Let's do our best! Let's work hard together!* And then when you keep acting reluctant, they'll suddenly get angry at you instead, and it turns into a lecture, like, *Oh dear, this sort of thing isn't going to work in your future, you know?*

In the end, you can't bring yourself to quit, and all you can do is shirk out…*(faraway look)*.

Beside Isshiki, Miss Hiratsuka was scratching her cheek and looking embarrassed. "I spoke with Isshiki's homeroom teacher, but…well, um, let's just say listening isn't this person's strong point."

"Oh, I see…" I got her drift and responded appropriately, and Miss Hiratsuka shamefully dropped her eyes to the floor.

"It seems Isshiki's teacher has mentally composed a moving story about it already… I had to listen to a babbling tale about some success story where a timid student is supported by the teacher and the whole class and becomes student council president…"

Oh, one of those, huh…? There's nothing worse than someone who believes they're doing the right thing.

“So once she reached the end of her rope, Isshiki talked with Shiromeguri,” Miss Hiratsuka said. Meguri and Isshiki nodded.

It sounded like Meguri had heard the story from Isshiki, and unsure as to how to deal with it, she’d gone to talk with Miss Hiratsuka, who brought the situation to us.

“So then you probably can’t withdraw,” I said.

Isshiki’s teacher wasn’t likely to let this go without a fight. But it seemed that wasn’t the only problem. Meguri was wrapping her pigtail around her finger uneasily. “Hmm… Besides…there’s also the question of how she could withdraw…”

“Agh…”

As I was thinking about why that was an issue, Yukinoshita put her hand to her jaw and slowly began to speak, as if she was summarizing her thoughts. “Is it because there is nothing written in the election protocol about the withdrawal of candidacy?”

Meguri blinked, startled. “Wow, you know, Yukinoshita… Yes, it was never written to begin with…”

I see. Of course, anyone who’d want to be on student council would be a motivated go-getter. Whoever had written up the protocol must not have expected a need to establish and record provisions for something like that. *There goes Yukipedia. She really does know everything.*

“Oh!” Yuigahama raised her hand and said, “Ah, so then you can’t make it so that she can’t be president ’cause she’s a first-year?”

But Yukinoshita gave her a grim shake of the head. “You can’t.”

“Huh? Why not?” Yuigahama asked back, puzzled.

Meguri smiled weakly and answered, “That’s not in the protocol, either… There’s nothing that says the president can only be a second-year.”

“In other words, it’s simply been customary for a second-year student to run for student council president,” Yukinoshita supplemented. This convinced Yuigahama, and she frowned a little.

There was a tacit understanding of that convention, but since it hadn’t been stipulated in writing, they wouldn’t be able to use that as a shield to invalidate Isshiki’s candidacy. So since it couldn’t be legally invalidated by loopholes in the protocol, that meant we just had to tackle this the hard way.

“If you don’t want to do it, then you should lose the election,” I said. “Or rather, that’s all you can do.” This was the surest route. No matter how much you wanted to be student council president,

you couldn't do it if you didn't win the election. In other words, the most effective way to avoid becoming president would be to lose the election.

But Meguri lowered her eyelids. "Hmm… But Isshiki is the only candidate in this election…"

Yukinoshita took over from there. "Meaning a vote of confidence."

"Yes, so it's just about inevitable…"

A vote of confidence is a method for when there is only one candidate. Unlike what you would typically imagine—a ballot where you select from multiple candidates—you simply indicate whether you approve of the candidate or not by marking a circle or X on the ballot sheet.

With elections like this, everyone will generally circle it without a thought. Of course, I'm sure some people would put an X to be funny, but I'd say they're in the minority. As long as you secure the majority, you can win confidence, so it's a foregone conclusion, barring any major issues.

But even so.

"Well, if you want to lose, there is a way to do it, though…," I said.

But Isshiki didn't seem to like that idea, pouting with her cheeks puffed up. "Wait, but I'd look dumb losing a vote of confidence! The fact that it's a vote of confidence is pretty shabby to begin with… That'd be too embarrassing. I don't want that."

Wow, selfish. Isn't that the sort of thing that got you into this situation? I started to think for a second, but the form had in fact been submitted without Isshiki's permission, so she wasn't at fault. Of course, I'm sure there had been a number of issues that had led to this happening to her, but even so, it wasn't right to be forced to be president when you didn't want to, or to be unnecessarily hurt by having a vote of nonconfidence thrust upon you. So it wasn't as if her feelings weren't understandable. So you shouldn't have to resign yourself to the absurdity thrust upon you by the majority.

So then we couldn't have her simply lose.

"All that's been announced so far is the candidates' names, right?" I checked with Meguri in order to gather my thoughts.

"Huh? Yes, that's right."

"So it hasn't been decided yet who will do Isshiki's campaign speech."

“Nope.” Meeting my gaze, Meguri shook her head. But there was a question mark floating there, and it seemed she hadn’t figured out the point of my questions.

But this was enough for me. I had all the information I needed. “Then it’ll be fast and easy.”

“Um, what do you mean?” she asked.

I organized my thoughts in detail and proceeded to explain. “This just means that worst case, if it ends up as a vote of confidence, we have to make sure Isshiki loses without looking bad, right? Basically, everyone simply has to understand she wasn’t the reason behind the vote of nonconfidence.”

“Can you do that?” Yuigahama, who’d been listening silently until then, asked.

I nodded in response. “If the election speech is what keeps her from getting elected, then nobody will care about Isshiki.” You just had to replace the reason for her defeat, the cause of the rejection, the why of her repudiation.

And there was something I could do about that.

Before I explained my methods in specifics, I paused for a moment.

It wasn’t to gather my thoughts, or even to take a breath, or for effect.

I’d simply noticed an unsettling silence.

Yuigahama was quiet. She stared at me intently with sadness in her eyes before looking down as if she’d swallowed something bitter. Meguri seemed to notice this change in her and glanced between me and Yuigahama in confusion. Isshiki must have been tuned in to what was going on, too, as she twisted around uncomfortably.

And then there was a soft clicking sound.

I twitched over toward the sound to see Yukinoshita laying her arms on the desk. When she’d unfolded her arms, the button of her blazer sleeve had tapped against the desk.

In the silence, it had sounded particularly loud.

And in the still, quiet room, Yukinoshita’s voice sounded out. “I won’t accept that solution.”

My eyebrows pulled together at her accusatory, condemning manner of speaking. “…Why not?” I asked.

“…Well…”

I hadn’t meant to cross-examine her, but my tone had

sharpened anyway. Yukinoshita looked away for an instant. Her long eyelashes quietly quavered as she blinked.

But that was the briefest of moments. She immediately looked back at me, fixing her gaze on me with eyes that communicated even stronger determination than before. "…Because it's not certain. You couldn't know for sure it would end up a vote of nonconfidence. Besides, a horrible speech costing Isshiki the vote would make things awkward for her. And even if votes against her were in the majority, do you think they would go to the trouble of holding another election? I doubt there's any precedent for that. And… And there's so little interest in student council, nobody would care if they declared the results without publicizing the number of votes… In other words, if you wanted, you could easily —" Yukinoshita rapidly made her argument longer and longer as she held me with that sharp gaze. It was as if she was lining up every reason she could think of.

Miss Hiratsuka chided her kindly. "Yukinoshita."

"…I shouldn't have said that. I retract that," Yukinoshita said after a pause. Then she bowed her head at Meguri. Meguri smiled and shook her head.

I suppose that could be called a faux pas. She'd been about to say in front of Meguri, who was on the election committee, *If you wanted, the school could easily fudge the election*.

A chair creaked.

I saw Yuigahama's face pointed toward me. However, even though we were facing each other, our eyes did not meet. "Hey, so who would do that speech anyway…? I don't like that idea." The weak and feeble question lingered unpleasantly in my ears.

"Well…whoever can do it should, right?" I said, but I knew full well who was most fit for the job. I didn't need to bother spelling out who'd be the most effective there.

The sun must have descended a bit, as suddenly a shadow fell across the clubroom. It felt as if the artificial lighting of the fluorescent bulbs had intensified.

Suddenly, Yukinoshita raised her head. "Shiromeguri. If Isshiki isn't going to withdraw, I believe we'll need a new candidate."

"Yeah, that's right…," Meguri replied.

Yukinoshita breathed a short sigh and said, "So then we have to back another candidate to make this a ballot election."

"If someone was even interested, then they would've already

announced candidacy," I pointed out. "And by 'back another candidate,' do you mean we're gonna go around asking every single person?"

"But, um, if we go for people who seem like they might do it…," Yuigahama replied, mulling over it hesitantly.

"…Well, whatever. So what if you find someone who'll run? Can they win? I think you understand that high school student council elections are basically popularity contests." I glanced over at Isshiki.

This was a surprisingly high hurdle.

At first glance, Isshiki was cute. Most people would call her fairly pretty. And her fluffy gentleness and lively cheer made her probably one of the most popular in the school in the boys' minds.

In a high school student council election, the competition is not about campaign pledges or manifestos or whatever. You could campaign on promises to change school regulations, but everyone knows that's highly unlikely to happen. Candidates will bring up all sorts of stuff like eliminating school uniforms or making school rules laxer or letting you go on the roof or whatever, but there's no precedent for any of that having been actualized.

So then clearly, the election would end up being a simple popularity contest between the candidates, or it would be based on the organizational power of their friendships.

For a popularity contest of that sort, the first people to come to mind with good prospects of victory would be Hayama or Miura. But Hayama was in the soccer club, and as captain, too. Miura being Miura, she was not the type to be student council president, either. So then that would mean going for the lesser figures, but those options would be less reliable. What's more, we couldn't just find them and ask them to do it.

There was still another problem remaining.

"By the election date, you have to pick someone, negotiate with them, and campaign. Do you think you can do all that? And you have to be sure to win. If there was someone, a realistic option to rely on, that'd be fine. But right now you don't have anyone, do you?" I said, certain it was impossible. The more I tried to speak calmly, the heavier my tone got. Though I hadn't at all meant it to sound accusatory, my words had a sharp edge.

"Um, Hikigaya?" Meguri said to me, sounding a bit surprised. That made me realize that to someone else, I'd look irritated.

"…" Yukinoshita and Yuigahama both fell silent.

They probably understood without my even saying it. If you considered the matter and you were well versed in the affairs of the school, you'd get it. But despite that, we were silent, unable to give the clear answer.

A heavy air hung over us.

In the corner of my eye, I saw Isshiki breathe a tired sigh. She was reminding us how awkward she felt, silently asking, *Why do I have to be here?* Seeing someone else's fatigue infected me, too, and I found myself sighing as well.

"It seems we won't reach a conclusion immediately," Miss Hiratsuka said, pushing herself away from the wall she'd been leaning against this whole time. As if taking her quiet *hup* as a signal, we all folded our legs the other way or stretched a little.

Yukinoshita adjusted herself in her seat and then addressed Meguri. "…Shiromeguri, would you mind coming another time?"

"Huh? Oh, sure… Of course," Meguri replied, a little confused, and Miss Hiratsuka gently pushed her in the back.

"Well then, let's leave this for another day. Let's go, Shiromeguri, Isshiki."

Right before the teacher was about to leave the clubroom, taking the two girls with her, Yukinoshita called out to her. Her expression was more frigid than usual, creating a sense of fervid intensity around her. "Miss Hiratsuka. Do you have a moment?"

"Oh, then I'll get going." Meguri must have sensed something was up, as she took Isshiki and left the clubroom.

Miss Hiratsuka watched them go before turning back to us. "Okay, let's hear what you have to say." She pulled out a chair with a scrape and folded her long legs.

X X X

The room seemed to have darkened a little. By contrast, the open sky out the window was a brilliant red. As we approached winter solstice, the night came earlier day by day.

Miss Hiratsuka patiently waited for Yukinoshita to begin.

The tea had already entirely chilled, and nobody was reaching out to the arranged snacks. I could hear the needle of the clock

ticking and, occasionally, a tired sigh from someone.

Some length of time passed, and finally, Yukinoshita opened her mouth. “I remembered something.”

“Huh? What?” I asked.

Yukinoshita didn’t answer me, turning back to Miss Hiratsuka instead. “How is the competition going right now?”

“Competition?” The question made Miss Hiratsuka blink. Me and Yuigahama did, too. Why were we suddenly talking about competitions now?

But after a bit of thinking, I figured it out.

For us, the only competition was *that* competition from way back. Which of us could help more people with problems, who could serve people better. And the victor could get the loser to do whatever they wanted. That was established when I’d first joined the Service Club.

“Um…competition?” Yuigahama said, examining us.

Oh yeah. The rules of the competition had been changed at some point.

“A competition for who can serve others best, who can resolve people’s problems. You’re allowed to get people to help you, and whoever wins can get the others to do whatever they want,” I said quite concisely.

Yuigahama made a noise somewhere between surprise and confusion. “You had a competition going, huh…?” It seemed Miss Hiratsuka hadn’t told her about it. Well, I could get an idea as to why she hadn’t.

Looking over at the culprit, Miss Hiratsuka, she seemed rather flustered. “O-oh yeah…” She folded her arms, tilted her head, and groaned. “H-hmm, what about that~? W-well, you dealt with things together a lot of the time! Mm-hmm. I feel like everyone’s doing a good job, yep.”

“…” Yukinoshita’s cold expression did not falter as she silently gave Miss Hiratsuka a hard look.

“…Agh.” Miss Hiratsuka breathed a tired sigh. It seemed she’d intended to avoid this question, but she capitulated to Yukinoshita’s serious glare.

But it was true that lately, a lot of things had made it hard to see how the competition should be judged. We’d more often operated as the Service Club, as a whole, rather than each of us acting individually.

But still, it seemed Yukinoshita wouldn't permit such ambiguity. She continued applying her silent pressure, and Miss Hiratsuka turned to face her again. "I haven't been aware of everything you've done, including some of your requests. So I'm being honest when I say strictly speaking, I couldn't make a judgment. But…" Miss Hiratsuka paused.

"But?" Yukinoshita prompted her to continue.

Miss Hiratsuka gazed at each of us in turn and slowly said, "I told you that the basis for my judgment would be my own biased and arbitrary opinions. So I can offer you comparative evaluations."

"I don't mind that… Are you two fine with that as well?" Yukinoshita gave us a sidelong glance.

I had no objections. It seemed Yuigahama hadn't quite absorbed the situation, but she still nodded in agreement.

Confirming each of our responses, Miss Hiratsuka nodded, too. "If we're going purely by results, then Hikigaya is one step ahead. If we're considering the process and follow-up more, then Yukinoshita would be winning. And either way, without Yuigahama's contributions, none of it would have come together…"

That was a bit of a surprising evaluation. She was being kinder than I'd expected.

Of course, if you were considering things comprehensively, it would probably not be as good, but even so, this arbitration was nothing like what I had anticipated.

When I looked around to see how the others felt about this, I saw Yuigahama looking pensive and meek.

Yukinoshita, on the other hand, was still sitting firmly upright, eyes closed, not even twitching. And then slowly, in a voice lacking any emotion or inflection, she asked quietly, "…In other words, the contest isn't over yet?"

"That's right," Miss Hiratsuka replied.

As if pressing her for an answer, Yukinoshita said, "If the competition is still ongoing, that means this time, we may be permitted to have divided opinions on this matter, doesn't it?"

"Um, what do you mean?" Yuigahama's shoulders cringed a bit, anxiously. Like Yuigahama, I couldn't guess as to what Yukinoshita meant, so I waited for what she'd say next.

Yukinoshita glanced over at Yuigahama, and then without looking at me, she said, "I mean there's no need for us to adopt the same methods."

She was completely right. We'd never had any obligation to cooperate in the first place, and we hadn't established a precedent of cooperating well together, either. I think that was just the sort of relationship we had. "Yeah, that makes sense. There's no point in us forcing ourselves to work together," I agreed.

"…Indeed," Yukinoshita replied briefly. And with that, the conversation was over.

Miss Hiratsuka seemed to consider that response for a while but then sighed in resignation. "Nothing I say will make a difference anyway. You kids do what you please. So what'll you do about the club until you resolve this?" she asked.

Without taking time to think, as if she'd decided this beforehand, Yukinoshita immediately answered, "I suppose attendance could be voluntary."

"…Yeah, that sounds fair." Miss Hiratsuka accepted that, too. At the very least, I doubted there was a point in all of us sitting around here in silence anyway, not at this stage. If each of us had our own ways of doing things, then we wouldn't have to bother coming to this clubroom. I had no objections.

I took up my bag and left my usual seat at the very edge of the room. "Then I'm going home."

"Ah, h-hey, hold on!" Yuigahama stood, chair scraping on the floor. It looked like she would come toward me, so I gently stopped her.

"…You should think this over carefully, too."

"Huh…?" Yuigahama merely stood there. Did she understand the meaning of what I'd said? I was talking about more than this particular incident.

We should probably be thinking about the future, too.

I continued out the door without saying anything back to Yuigahama.

Behind me, there was a murmur. "Playing friendly was supposed to be the thing you and I both hated most…"

Yukinoshita's words made me turn around automatically.

Her sad smile seemed somehow self-deprecating. I had no words of reply and quietly closed the door.

X X X

Reshouldering my heavy, mostly empty bag, I walked through the empty hallways. My single set of footsteps rang loud in the quiet school building.

When I looked into the schoolyard from the window, I could see the sports clubs still practicing. Finally, they started cleaning up and stretching and such, sparse shadows moving on the wide grounds. I was gazing at these shadows as I walked when pleasant clicking footsteps pursued me from behind.

"Hikigaya." A voice called me to a stop, and I paused there for only a moment. I knew who the owner of that voice was. That was why I merely slowed down and didn't turn around.

Miss Hiratsuka sped up, and in a moment, she was walking by my side. "I guess there's no point in asking…," she muttered as she combed down her long hair roughly through her fingers. As expected of Miss Hiratsuka. She knew it well.

But it seemed she had to ask anyway as we descended the stairs together. "What happened?"

"Nothing."

I didn't know how many times I'd said that.

Would saying that over and over eventually convince me it was true? Not at all. In fact, it was exactly the opposite, and I was even starting to doubt my own words and actions.

Whether she knew of these feelings or not, Miss Hiratsuka chuckled wryly. "Well, have it your way. I know you're not exactly an open book."

She didn't try to ask again. The two of us walked from the bottom of the stairs down the hallway without a word. If you turned the corner ahead, you'd reach the teacher's room, while going straight would take you to the school entrance.

Approaching the place where we would part ways, before I said my good-byes, Miss Hiratsuka opened her mouth first. "You're a kind person, Hikigaya… There are quite a few people you've helped."

"No, I doubt that…" I didn't think that was true. Kindness or help are not things I give. That's for other, better people.

And it's not so easy to save someone in the first place. Selfishly seeking out someone beneath you, patting yourself on the back for helping them, and finding meaning in those actions is nothing more than an attempt to reassure yourself you're a good person.

So it wasn't as if I'd done anything.

I tried to deny it, but Miss Hiratsuka stopped me with a light wink. “It’s just like I told you earlier, in my evaluation.”

“…You’re overestimating me,” I retorted.

But she puffed out her chest and chuckled. “I may not look it, but I’m very prone to favoritism.”

“Isn’t that bad for a teacher?”

“It’s part of my policy of positive reinforcement,” she said, unruffled.

Is that right…? I don’t really remember getting any compliments, though… “I never got that impression…” I shrugged.

Miss Hiratsuka smiled. “Of course, I do just as much scolding.”

The school building was designed to look like a boat, and the evening light streamed through the plentiful glass windows, the soft rays of the setting sun shining in the still hallways. However, the light was not warm.

Miss Hiratsuka stood with the sun at her back, blocking the glow.

She set off to the teachers’ room, away from the entrance, where I was headed. As we parted ways, she kindly patted my shoulder. “The way you do things—when you meet someone you really want to help, you won’t be able to do it.”

A single set of footsteps echoed down the hallway.

Gradually, they grew distant.

3

Haruno Yukinoshita is thoroughly unfathomable.

My bicycle raced to surpass its shadow.

It was already a little late to be calling it evening, and the tree-lined road along the river was now dark. With the sun sinking into Tokyo Bay at my back, I rotated the pedals.

Starting the next day, I'd probably be able to go home earlier.

Attendance at the Service Club had become temporarily voluntary.

We were making it a battle royale, and if I was going to do things differently than the other two, then there was no need to force ourselves to work together. I'd already decided how I was going to handle things, and my plan didn't require much preparation. I only had to manage on the day of. So then all I had to do until the day of the election was make sure not to get in their way.

Most of all.

Even if I didn't pull it off, if the other two did, then that was fine. I was sure they'd resolve it better than me.

Both parties had chosen noninterference. There was no need to bother with the perilous path of approaching each other and closing the gap. Finding an appropriate distance and maintaining it is another way for people to get along.

As for the club activities, I decided not to think about it anymore.

But funny enough, when you try not to think about anything, it only brings up even more intrusive thoughts. When I tried to turn my attention away from school-related things, naturally, I ended up thinking about home instead. This reminded me of my exchange

with Komachi that morning in the living room.

I wonder if she's still mad…?

When she's outwardly huffy, it's just like, *Oh, how cute*, but when she starts ignoring you, that's proof she's seriously angry. Once, she ignored Dad like that, and he went crying to Mom about it.

Our parents would probably be coming home late, as usual. So then I'd be home alone with Komachi.

Being home alone together with your little sister is normally the sort of setup that'd make your heart dance. No, wait, that's not normal.

But this one day, it'd be hard for us to face each other.

It would be best to wait a little longer until things had cooled down.

With that thought, the handlebars of my bicycle turned to the right.

On the road home from school, if you turn right on the national highway, you'll end up in downtown Chiba. You can kill a fair amount of time there at the movie theater, bookstores, arcades, or manga cafés.

Things had been pretty busy during the school field trip, and I hadn't had much time to enjoy myself alone. The weekend after my return, I'd ended up lying around, and then it was over.

Finally, I could relieve some stress. I've always liked my alone time.

While I was wondering about where I should goof off, gradually, I began to feel more at ease. Pedaling away as I hummed, "Princess, princess, princess," I rode full speed along the long highway that went on and on.

X X X

By the time I arrived downtown, the sun had fallen far enough that it was no longer sunset, and the nighttime bustle of the city was in full swing. Making my way along National Highway 14 into the downtown core, I headed toward Chuo Station in Chiba.

Around here, there's an Animate, a Tora no Ana, and a movie theater, so it has everything you'd need to kill time.

I window-shopped around a bunch of stores, bought two, three books, and eyeballed the display in front of the movie theater. It was a little under an hour until the movie I was somewhat interested in would start. That was the perfect amount of time to go drink a coffee somewhere.

Directly below the movie theater was a Starbucks. But I didn't really know how to order there, and the raging *We're so fashionable* energy of the customer base there just didn't sit right with me, so I decided to go somewhere else. It's impossible to truly express in words the feeling you get seeing someone with stylish glasses clacking away on a MacBook Air, but it's something akin to a land mine lying in wait for you. You start feeling like, *I'll smash an apple into those glasses of yours, you damn hipster*.

The donut shop kitty-corner from the movie theater gives customers free refills on coffee, and they also have café au lait. And in fact, sweetening the café au lait makes it more Chiba-like and even better. You have to value your teatime, you know?

I went into the shop and ordered an old-fashioned donut, a French cruller, and a café au lait. Then I went to the second-floor seating, aiming for a counter spot.

Man, enjoying pastries with a sweet café au lait and a book is perfect bliss. Even for idols, if they're hurt by some minor thing someone said, eating something sweet'll make them happy.

Feeling mildly cheerful as I looked for a seat, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed someone looking at me.

"Oh, look who's here."

I turned toward the voice addressing me, and the woman removed her headphones and smiled, waving at me. She wore a loose-knit cardigan over a white blouse with a standing collar. Even though her legs were wrapped in an ankle-length skirt, I could tell they were long and elegant. She was dressed for winter, but not weighed down by the heavier clothing. Maybe because she always seemed to keep everything light.

She was the elder sister of Service Club leader Yukino Yukinoshita, and a perfect superhuman who surpassed even Yukino: Haruno Yukinoshita.

A donut shop like this place really didn't suit her. In fact, she would have made a fair picture sitting behind the glass at the counter of that earlier Starbucks.

Since I'd never expected to meet her here, I instinctively tensed

up.

Checking what she was up to, I saw she had a few books spread open on the table. None of them were paperbacks, and some of them had very imposing-looking binding. At a glance, the letters looked like the Roman alphabet—were those English books?

"…Ah, hi." I casually bobbed my head at her and sat myself down a ways away. Why do we stick in *ah* before saying stuff? It's not like *hi* is a noun.

Anyway, I took a bite out of the French cruller.

Damn it… Why is she here…? I should've gotten this to go… I blew this one… I should've made sure there was no one I knew in this restaurant before I came in.

Anyway, let's finish this stuff fast and then leave, I thought, putting my lips to the café au lait, but unfortunately, I have a sensitive tongue.

As I desperately blew on my coffee, Haruno carried her tray over to sit beside me. "You don't have to run away. Geez. Rude."

"Oh, no, I just didn't want to bother you." I think this is a loner's way of being considerate. It's kind of like how when I'm alone in town and I happen to run into an acquaintance, and we both try exchanging a few remarks, and things feel weird, like, *So when should we end this…?* and for some reason, I feel guilty, like it's my fault.

If you happen to run into someone unexpectedly, you should withdraw immediately. It's not good to be conceited.

But it seems that when you're someone with such little respect for personal space as Haruno, those thoughts don't occur to you. As if she'd been sitting beside me all along, she took a book in hand in the exact same pose as before. Pulling out the attached string bookmark, she opened the page she'd been reading.

If she was just going to read anyway, then she didn't have to bother moving over here, did she…? She does whatever she wants, huh? I thought, looking over at her.

Gaze still down on her book, she said to me, "What are you doing out here?"

"…Killing time until a movie."

"Oh, then about the same as me, huh?"

"…Are you going to see a movie?" That came out rather disgruntled. But there was no helping that. If she was planning to see the same movie as me, then even if we parted ways here, we'd

wind up in the somewhat irritating and awkward situation of running into each other again at the movie theater…

But it seemed I was worrying over nothing, as Haruno replied sunnily, “Hmm? No, no. I’m killing time until I’m going out to eat with a friend.”

That reminded me that Haruno’s university was pretty close, like in west Chiba or something. They have bars over there, but I feel like the number of “trendy” places around the area has increased. If she wanted to get something to eat, downtown’s a logical place to come. And as for hip eats in downtown Chiba, then…Naritake Ramen, I guess? That back fat is like a sprinkling of snow! So elegant!

“Agh, a friend, huh? I don’t want to be in the way, so I’ll leave you to it.”

“That’s not for a while. It’s fine; let’s kill time togeeether.” She scooted her chair over toward me.

Too close, too close and soft, close, close, nice smell, close… Though I attempted to twist as far away from her as she came near, she closed that distance, too.

And then she whispered in my ear, “Guys like you are the best, Hikigaya.”

Something cold ran up my spine. It wasn’t simple fear. It was close to the thrill of peering down into a dark hole and sensing that if you fell into it, you’d keep on falling forever. Her alluring voice sharpened every sensation, including her thin fingers laid gently on my shoulder and the seductive luster of her lips.

I jerked back and looked at her, and her moist eyes met mine. Her gaze made me want to be deceived by the bewitching smile on her lips, but she was doing this with the sole purpose of getting a reaction out of me.

And as proof of that, she shifted back again and bubbled with laughter. “If I don’t say anything, you won’t talk to me, but when I talk to you, you give me an answer. It’s so convenient. The perfect person for killing time with.”

I really don’t feel like that’s a compliment… That’s, like, lower specs than recent browser games. You know how the recent ones will start chattering at you when you leave them running, like *KanColle* and stuff.

Haruno returned to her reading again, but right before she did, she added one remark. “Most boys try to make conversation, which,

like, no."

…Ohhh, I get that… Yeah.

Some guys are so desperate to get a girl to like them that they say all sorts of stuff to them. Normally, they won't talk at all, but when they suddenly have this chance to talk, they'll uncharacteristically muster up their courage and try to start a conversation, and yet their attempts are always mediocre at best. They exist, and they're real cringey. For example, me in middle school—what year was that again?

But anyway, because of what she'd just done, I'd missed my chance to leave. I might have to wait for my next chance.

Her silence didn't bother me. In fact, silence is my field of specialty.

It's like, you know, since taciturn men are great, after all.

It's here… The loner age has come. From now on, the type of boy who doesn't converse will flourish (not that I'm saying he'll get girls).

Since there was nothing for me to talk to her about, we weren't really going to end up chatting.

Time passed serenely.

Thinking about it, I hadn't seen Haruno since the cultural festival.

But my impression of her today was very different from all the other times I'd seen her—maybe because she was quiet. Or maybe I should say she was mellowed.

It seemed when her sister wasn't around, she didn't meddle much. In fact, she seemed calm. *Wait, just* how *much does this girl love her sister? Oh, I love my little sister, too, I guess. She probably hates me because of what happened this morning, though…*

Remembering the incident with Komachi that morning got me a little down. Times like this, it's best to think about something else.

Oh, these donuts are good…but the café au lait could be a little sweeter. It's 'cause they don't have condensed milk here. I poured in stick sugar as a substitute and drank it like that, noticing Haruno out of the corner of my eye.

She had a book spread open on top of the table, face leaned on one hand, occasionally reaching out to her coffee.

Seeing her quietly reading a book, I thought she really did resemble her younger sister—her fingertip as she turned the pages, the white nape of her neck peeking out whenever she took a drink

from her cup, and the way her eyes narrowed when they stopped on a certain sentence.

She looked a lot like what I'd seen of Yukino Yukinoshita for nearly six months.

Haruno suddenly noticed my gaze and shifted her face with a "Hmm?" as if to ask me, *Do you need something?*

I shook my head. "…Oh, I'm going to get a refill, so…"

"Yes, please." She handed me her cup, and I got a refill on the café au lait and her coffee from a passing staff member. Taking the cups, I gently laid down hers in a spot where it wouldn't get in her way.

It'd be weird to watch her the whole time, so I decided to read the book I'd just bought, too.

The only sound coming from our vicinity was the turning of pages.

I wasn't really bothered by the music they played in the store. But I didn't understand the lyrics of this song. What the heck is "I donuts you"? What's going on there? And what's more, when you listen closely, it's actually a decent song.

While I was drinking my second helping of café au lait (which had finally cooled to lukewarm), I was turning one more page, when suddenly Haruno said, "Hikigaya."

"Yes?"

The two of us conversed as we continued to read.

"Tell me a funny story."

"…" That terrible attempt at conversation made me automatically fall silent. My disgust probably showed on my face, too. *What's with this woman…?* I thought as I looked over at her to see a big grin on her face.

"That utterly disgusted reaction… Ohhh, it's everything I hoped for!" she said, bursting into playful laughter.

If you know that, then don't say it… The minute I think she might let me have some peace, she starts messing around.

Is she innocent, or unrestrained, or audacious?

She's a hard person to pin down, and I really don't like her.

Haruno must have reached a good place to stop, as she closed her book and stretched wide with a groan. *When you pose like that, um, it's sort of attention-getting…the part that's very different from your sister.*

"Is Yukino-chan doing well?" Haruno asked me, reaching out to

her coffee cup, her fingertips stroking the rim.

"…Well, the same as usual, I suppose."

" I see. Then that's good."

Considering she'd been the one to ask, she didn't seem all that interested in the answer, and she put her books away in her bag as she spoke. Then she laid her elbows on the now-cleared space on the table, laced her fingers together, and rested her chin on them in a pose like a certain commander. Comanner.

Haruno turned her face toward me, then cleared her throat in a deliberate-sounding way. "So…how have things gone since then?"

"Agh…"

“Made any progress?”

If you don’t use specific vocabulary, I won’t really know what you’re talking about. I replied with a vague sigh as if to say, *Care to elaborate?*

She gave me a quizzical look. “Wasn’t there a field trip?”

“Oh, you know about that?” I remarked in surprise. Well, she had gone to our school, so she could know around what time it would be. But even so, her knowledge was precise.

A little proud, Haruno revealed her secret. “We got souvenirs at home.”

By *souvenirs*, that had to mean from her sister. Inferring from the way she’d phrased her explanation, it seemed Yukinoshita hadn’t gone over to hand them to her directly.

“She went to the trouble of getting them delivered…?” *How dumb is she? She couldn’t have bought all that much, and it’s a few stations away, at most…*

Haruno held her cup in both hands, breathing a short, bored sigh. “I’m sure she just didn’t want to see us.”

“But she still buys you souvenirs… How conscientious…,” I mumbled to myself in exasperation and wonder. That was also weirdly Yukinoshita-like, so it made sense to me.

But Haruno didn’t seem to agree, shaking her head. “Oh, I don’t think that’s it.”

Her quick denial made me curious, and I examined her out of the corner of my eye. Yukinoshita is fussy about manners, and I understood her to be a fairly conscientious type. Was something about that wrong?

Haruno tilted her cup, lowering her gaze to the black ripples. “She hates us, but she doesn’t want to be hated, you know…,” she said quietly, in the faintest whisper, in a way that could be taken as kindness or pity. That quiet tone was directed at herself and someone not present.

I was sure I wouldn’t be allowed to ask any further, so I kept my mouth shut.

Noticing my silence, Haruno put down her cup and spun around to face me in a particularly melodramatic manner. “But since your school trip is over, there won’t be any more big events, so I suppose now you’ll be basically focusing on entrance exams. Isn’t that

boring?"

I decided to switch over to that topic, too. "Not really. There's still stuff going on with the student council elections."

"The elections? Huh? That's not over by now?" Puzzled, she tilted her head and hummed. As expected of a Soubu graduate. She seemed to be consulting her own memories.

"It kinda never got settled, so there was an extension."

"Meguri is finally retiring, huh?" There was something emotional about the way she said that.

To me, Meguri was an upperclassman I could rely on— Wait, no, I've never relied on her. She's really unreliable. In fact, she's even relied on me, so that would make her more a cute upperclassman, but to Haruno, she had to be a cute junior student. Hey, that means Meguri is supercute. Megurin's cute, oh so cute.

Haruno must have been remembering that, and she giggled. "This is Meguri we're talking about, so I bet she asked Yukino-chan to be student council president, right?"

"Oh, actually, no she didn't."

"What? That's boring." Haruno swung her feet in dissatisfaction. "…So then Yukino-chan isn't going to be student council president."

"Doesn't look like it."

Around now, Yukinoshita would be planning to back another candidate. I didn't know who she intended to set up, but it was clear it'd be rough going. Taking into account time and workload, I didn't think it was a cost-efficient plan.

As I was thinking about Yukinoshita's intentions, I heard a thoughtful huff beside me. "Hmm…" It was merely a meaningless sigh, but it strangely stuck with me. It wasn't sexy or alluring or anything like that. That smile, just a slight twist of her lips as she looked out the window, was eerie even.

"…Um, is there some reason you thought she would?" I said after a breath's pause.

Haruno showed me her usual charming smile once more. "Hmm? Oh, because I didn't do it."

"Uh-huh, are you so sure? That's surprising, though." I'd thought for sure that Haruno would've had a history of roles like that. She had in fact been the chair of the cultural festival.

But she declared nonchalantly, "Is it? I mean, considering all the work, don't you think it'd be tedious?"

“Oh, that’s why.”

That kinda made sense.

The fact is that the majority of student council work is dull. They do also help with big events like the cultural festival, but most of the other work is behind-the-scenes stuff like this election management committee, and it’s all boring office work.

I’m sure most of the time they can sit around in the student council room and eat snacks, but if there’s ever a problem, the pressure will be on right away. Plus, the members of student council are expected to set a good example to all the students in the school. Well, they’re like public servants, so to speak. It’s what they call servant service.

I don’t think Haruno is quite the type who likes that kind of attention—I suppose you could call her a hedonist. She likes fun, having a party. Unlike student council, which involves a lot of sober work over a long period of time, the cultural festival is just one big shebang, and running something like that as chair would better suit her image.

But I couldn’t see any of that cheer now.

“…So *bored*,” she said with a giggle. Her tone was a penetrating cold that made me shiver. What lay at the depths of those words?

As I was waffling over whether I should even ask, a remark came to me from another direction. “Huh? Hikigaya?”

The unexpected voice was like a cheese grater against my brain.

I turned around to see two high school girls.

One of them had a short bob in a loose perm. Her eyes beneath that had a slight edge to them, a blank look on her face. She was the one who’d addressed me. She wore the uniform of Kaihin Secondary School, which is fairly close to where I live, but she was carrying a bag from a private school in the city. She wasn’t someone I was used to seeing.

But I instantly knew who she was. “…Orimoto.” Her name came out softly.

I’d thought all my middle school classmates had been abandoned at the bottom of my memory.

But Kaori Orimoto’s name came up easily.

X X X

The unexpected chance encounter made me stiffen up.

We each looked at the other's face, sizing each other up.

Suddenly, the events of two, three years ago passed through my mind. I could feel the sweat glands on my scalp opening, and wet drops sliding down my back, too.

Orimoto had a friend with her, a girl who was also wearing a Kaihin uniform and looking over at us with mild reserve.

Her friend looked at loose ends, but Orimoto didn't seem particularly concerned as she patted my shoulder and cried, "Wow, this takes me back! This is a rare character!"

As she stared at me rudely, all I could do was put on a stiff smile.

Indeed, based on the standards of the middle school we'd gone to, her encounter rate with me would be low. I might have noticed her, but she'd never notice me.

But if we were talking rarity, it was also plenty rare for her to not only see me but come talk to me, too. This was something that hadn't changed since middle school.

Orimoto was the so-called team mom, the self-professed big-sister type. She would talk to anyone and always got as close to people as possible.

After marveling at my presence for a while, she suddenly paused. "Huh? Hikigaya, are you going to Soubu?"

"Y-yeah." Her comment made me twist around to look at my uniform. Of the top university-oriented public high schools in the prefecture, ours is the only one that includes a blazer in the uniform. So any student living in the area would recognize it on sight.

It seemed Orimoto did, too, as she made an impressed noise. "Ohhh. That's surprising. So you must be smart! Oh, but I guess I never knew your test scores or anything at all, huh? I mean, you never talked to anyone." Still blunt as ever. She consciously avoided building walls and would deliberately dive right in.

She had to be trying to be the "real" type.

And then, as if it were the obvious thing to do, her interest turned toward Haruno beside me instead. "Your girlfriend?" she said in wonder, comparing me and Haruno.

Uncomfortable under her gaze, my voice got quieter than intended when I answered, "No…"

"Of course nooot! I figured there was no way!" Orimoto

cackled, and her friend hid her mouth behind a hand as well to restrain a giggle.

A long time ago, I'd have interpreted that as a carefree laugh. I'd taken her stance of talking to anyone to be an expression of kindness.

"Ha-ha-ha…" *Why am I doing this ingratiating laugh? Gross.*

A scene from two or three years ago tried to push its way into my mind. The humorless laugh left my mouth like vomit.

Watching our exchange from the side, Haruno casually examined my face. "Your friend, Hikigaya?"

Was it my imagination, or did it seem like she was asking that question with the vague implication of …*You had friends?* No, not my imagination.

Well, if you asked me if Orimoto was a friend, the answer was no, so I couldn't argue.

But I know the optimal answer for these sorts of situations. "She's a classmate from middle school." Yes, yes, that should be correct. I mean, when people who I'd thought were my friends introduced me to other people, that's how they'd described me.

After I answered, Orimoto bobbed her head in a bow at Haruno. "I'm Kaori Orimoto," she introduced herself.

Haruno examined Orimoto with her usual scrutinizing look. "Hmm… Oh, I'm Haruno Yukinoshita. I'm Hikigaya's…his… Hey, what am I to you?"

"Uh, don't ask me." *And why is she leaning into me in that sorta coquettish way, too? Stop with those upturned eyes, please.*

"It'd be strange to call us friends, wouldn't it? Hmm, then big sister? Oh, or sister-in-law…" Considering, Haruno put her hand to her jaw and glanced over at me. When I returned her look with apathetic eyes, she smirked. "Oh, how about taking the middle ground and saying girlfriend?"

What's with this beautiful declaration of love?

And what's wrong with her? How do you start with friend *and* big sister *and end up with that*? Wait…but if you swap older for younger sister, then my, how curious! Wait, nope, still doesn't work.

This was so clearly teasing, there was no way for me to mistake it for anything else, so I could respond calmly. "Can't we just call you someone from school?"

"You're so cold." Haruno said, puffing out her cheeks in a pout. I thought about poking her in that round cheek, but there was no

way I could do that, so I shrugged instead.

This exchange came off as rather forced, but now I was glad Haruno was there. Her presence kept me from thinking too deeply. This may have been the first time I'd ever felt thankful to her. If I'd run into Orimoto by chance and she'd spoken to me while I was alone, I would've fallen to the bottom of the dumps, gone home, and spent about five hours talking with the wall.

I'd call Kaori Orimoto my middle-school nightmare.

I wanted to get her and her friend to leave as soon as possible, before various items of the past could be dug up, but this prayer was in vain, as Orimoto said to Haruno, "It's so nice to see friends who used to go to your school, huh?"

"Right? But our relationship is more than that."

"Ohhh? What else is there?"

Orimoto's friend occasionally made polite remarks, and the idle conversation went on.

I kept silent, watching as they talked.

Small talk doesn't come with obvious end points. It'll slide on sideways forever. The only action I was allowed to take in the meantime was to sigh and put my lips to my café au lait. My forced walk down this minefield continued.

Suddenly, the conversation stopped.

I figured the conversation had gone on surprisingly long for a first meeting and they would be using this moment to begin the process of parting ways.

But Haruno folded her arms solemnly and, with a thin smile on her face, said, "But anyway, the same school as Hikigaya, huh? Any funny stories?"

Taking that question as an opportunity to continue the conversation, Orimoto said, "Hmm…" as she began to search her memory.

I had a really bad feeling. A really bad vision of the near future, to be precise.

"Come on, there's got to be something, right? Oh, like about his love life! I'd love to hear about his love life!" Haruno stirred the pot further, seemingly having a grand old time.

Sweat dampened my back once more, and I felt as if I were in middle school again. It nearly made me burst out laughing. Oh, I remembered well. Good grief. People only ever remember bad things.

If my communication skills had been a little better, I'm sure I could have admitted it myself and turned that love talk into a self-deprecating funny story. It's completely different when you say that stuff yourself, compared with when others say it about you. I should've taken the initiative. But since I wasted time on these thoughts, because I hesitated, I didn't make it in time.

Orimoto combed back her curled hair and smiled shyly. "Oh, that reminds me, once he told me he had a crush on me." She didn't waste any time.

"No way!"

Not only Haruno but also Orimoto's friend giggled and joined in on the conversation, too. "I'd love to hear more."

It seemed this topic was enough to get them worked up, and having drawn this card, Orimoto went on gleefully. "We'd never even spoken before, so I was really freaked out!"

Or so she said.

But we had talked. I know we had.

I guess Orimoto didn't remember. Or to be more accurate, she hadn't realized it was me she was speaking to.

And not just that. We'd texted, too.

When she'd given me her e-mail out of either pity or sympathy, I'd wrung every one of my brain cells trying to figure out how to message her, coming up with trivial reasons to text her, and flipping between joy and sorrow depending on whether she responded. I got so angry at the promotional e-mails that arrived in my inbox while I waited for her replies that I'd unsubscribed from them all.

Orimoto probably didn't know or remember any of it.

I'm sure at that time in life, everyone will have a crush on someone, and that's why they won't be interested in anyone outside their circle. The actions of someone like that might be used as joke material, but they won't be allowed to remain as memories.

Her words brought back my own memories, though, and the memories stirred my emotions.

Those events, which I thought I'd laughed off long ago, stabbed right at the spot where I'd been wounded then. My mouth, stuck twisted in a strained, polite smile, slowly expelled a deep, deep sigh.

"Oh, so Hikigaya confessed, did he?" Haruno said, as if she were surprised. But I could see a tinge of sadism in her gleeful eyes. It made me suspect maybe she'd inferred from my reaction to

Orimoto that something was up, and that was why she'd dragged this fact out of her.

Looking at a corner of the floor, I somehow moved my lips. "Well, it was a long time ago…"

"Right? It was a long time ago, so whatever, right?"

I think me and Orimoto meant that in different ways.

Orimoto laughed innocently, because it was a long time ago, because it was done, because it was over, so she was free to say anything now. I doubt she meant it maliciously. She only wanted to have a fun chat. Orimoto's friend and Haruno were smiling as if this was all just a fond little memory.

It was exactly like back then.

Back then, when I had confessed to her, I'd thought we were alone, but for some reason, the next day everyone in the class knew. I could hear their snickers from a distance.

I confessed, I was rejected, and that's fine. That doesn't really matter. With the passage of time, that can become a funny story. You can accept it as just another story from your youth.

What was hard was realizing how deeply upset I was over a little "no" from the girl I liked. But it had been my fault for not even understanding that much, for not recognizing it sooner. My own youthful ignorance was the one thing I couldn't laugh off.

They kept on talking a while, but I couldn't even hear them.

I think I was zoning out, lost in the past.

"Oh, that's right, Hikigaya."

"Hmm?" Hearing my name drew my attention.

Orimoto must have forgotten what they'd been talking about already, as she brought up something completely different. "So hey, if you go to Soubu, then do you know Hayama?"

"Hayama…," I repeated automatically, and Orimoto suddenly barreled on ahead.

"Yeah, Hayama! From the soccer club!"

Given the additional information, she had to mean the same Hayato Hayama I knew. "Yeah, well, I guess."

"For real?! I know so many girls who wanna meet him! Like this one," Orimoto exclaimed, interrupting me slightly. Then she pointed at the girl beside her. "Hey, this is a friend from my school, Chika Nakamachi."

Nakamachi smiled vaguely and gave a casual head bob. Orimoto jabbed her repeatedly in the side with her elbow. "Hey,

Chika, he might introduce you to Hayama."

"Huh? It's okay, though," Nakamachi said, but judging from the lack of shyness in her reaction, she seemed to have hopes.

But unfortunately, I wasn't that close with Hayama. We hadn't even exchanged phone numbers. "Uh, he's not really an acquaintance of mine…," I said.

Orimoto didn't really look disappointed; rather, it seemed she'd expected as much. She nodded in a slightly exaggerated manner. "Yeah, of course. I doubt you'd spend much time with each other."

"Ha-ha-ha…" Another dry laugh came out of me. Something had been tangled in the back of my throat all this time.

I cleared my throat a few times, nearly drowning out Haruno's quiet mutter: "…Hmm. Sounds fun."

"Huh?"

I turned around to see her eyes shining suspiciously. Then her hand shot into the air. "Ohhh! I'll introduce you! I'm a big sister, after all."

"What?"

Orimoto, Nakamachi, and I were all confused as Haruno popped her phone out and started making a call.

She tapped on the tabletop with her knuckles until the call went through. It rang about three times, I guess, and then as soon as it was clear the person had picked up, Haruno started speaking quickly. "Oh, Hayato? Can you get over here right now? Like, seriously, just come." Once she'd said her piece, she immediately hung up.

"What are you doing…?" I moaned.

"Mm, hee-hee! ♪" Haruno had a broad grin on her face.

She looks like she's really enjoying herself…

X X X

As we waited for Hayama to arrive, I stared blankly out the window at the city.

The sun had already fully set on Chiba, and the town was gradually starting to show why it was an entertainment district. Neon lights danced on the signs of the karaoke parlor across the street, and looking up, you could see the monorail cutting through

the darkness of the night. There must have been a lot of people out on the town, as I caught sight of groups of people strolling abreast.

Eventually, we heard the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs of the restaurant.

"Oh, sounds like he's here." Haruno leaned back to look over at the stairs, and sure enough, Hayato Hayama came over.

He must have come straight from soccer practice, as he was still in his uniform, athletic bag over his shoulder. When he saw us, he loosened his bolo tie, expression slightly tired. "What is this, Haruno?" Hayama took a good look at her and, while he was at it, glanced over at Orimoto and Nakamachi. Then finally, his gaze slid over to me and stopped right there.

"These girls wanted to meet you, Hayato." Haruno spread her hands and then swept one over to indicate Orimoto and her friend.

They must not have thought Hayama would actually come, as they giggled excitedly, leaning their faces close to whisper something to each other.

"…I see." Hayama let out a sigh that was so very short and quiet you would probably miss it, but then he immediately put on a bright grin. "Nice to meet you. I'm Hayato Hayama." Like flipping a switch, he showed us his usual Hayato Hayama face. After introducing himself, he began to chat pleasantly with them while Orimoto and Nakamachi cranked up the cuteness.

Thanks to the interest and attention shifting from me over to Hayama, finally, I could catch my breath. The lightly heated air inside the room somehow tasted better, too.

Now then, Hayama's here, so I guess I'll leave things to the young'uns and go home… I doubted I'd be seeing that movie now. If I were to go into the movie theater like this, I had a feeling I'd immediately fall asleep.

I closed my unfinished paperback and put it away in my bag. As I waited for the right moment to smoothly slip in a good-bye, the four of them seemed to be getting into their chat.

"Hey, why don't we go hang out some time?"

"Oh, I like that!" Orimoto and Nakamachi said, and Hayama nodded casually with a smile.

This is a technique only permitted to attractive guys who know how to work the mood without saying anything of substance: to indicate an answer with general attitude, without saying yes or no. When a guy at normal level or below does that, people will call him

wishy-washy or completely ignore him.

"Yeah, yeah, it'd be nice to go hang out. I'd love if we could all go. It'd be great," Haruno said with utter seriousness, folding her arms.

Their agreement got Orimoto and her friend excited, of course, and they started discussing all the places they'd like to go.

I just noticed this, but when Haruno says, We could all go*, I'm not invited, am I…?*

Well, that was obvious.

From their perspective, I was nothing more than an offering to use to summon Hayama. I mean, in order to do a Tribute Summon of a monster over level 5, you need to Tribute a lower-level monster and send it to the Graveyard, so there's no helping that. Stick to the rules and happy dueling!

As a loner who'd already been sent to the Graveyard, all I could do was watch things happen.

They chatted very pleasantly for a bit, but before fifteen minutes had passed, Hayama seemed to have adroitly managed to slip out of the conversation, skillfully creating a moment in which the two girls were forced to withdraw.

"Then we should get going…"

"Yeah, see you again, Hayama! I'll text you!" They waved, and Hayama waved back. Even as they left, the girls were chattering away about Hayama, like, "Wow," "So cool," "Wow," but once they disappeared down the stairs, I couldn't hear their voices anymore.

I watched the two of them disappear completely from sight, and then Hayama's smile quickly shifted into something much colder. His eyes flicked over at Haruno in a glare. "…Why do this?"

"Because it seemed fun." Haruno bubbled with laughter, without an ounce of timidity. Her laugh was far from anything that could be called innocent—her malice was transparent.

Hayama breathed a sigh, seemingly in admonishment or reproach. "That again… So then why is he here, too? He doesn't have anything to do with this," Hayama said, turning only his head toward me, and Haruno immediately countered him.

"Not true! That girl—oh, the one with the perm—Hikigaya once had a crush on her! Don't you think that's so funny? I wonder how Yukino-chan would react if she found out… What do you think, Hikigaya?" Then she finished with a smile at me. But she was the only one here who was amused.

Of course I wouldn't find this funny. And for some reason, Hayama's face was melancholy, too.

"…" In contrast with Haruno's cheer, Hayama and I were silent.

When the conversation died, Haruno breathed a short sigh of boredom, then stood up as if moving on, patting Hayama on the shoulder. "Well, just give it a shot. Hang out with them. You might actually have a good time together," she said.

Hayama's shoulders quietly slumped. His gaze was focused on a point right between his and Haruno's feet. "That won't happen…"

"Oh? You never know." She casually turned aside Hayama's listless reply and tugged up one of her sleeves. A cute silver-and-pink wristwatch shone there. "Yep, this has been a nice way to fill time. Right, I'm off now." Before she even finished talking, Haruno briskly gathered up her things. "Hikigaya, thank you for spending time with me," she whispered like it was a secret, leaning into my ear.

A fresh floral scent wafted off her as her soft breath brushed my ear. It made me automatically lean away. *My ears are really ticklish, so please don't do that!* I took two, three steps back to quickly get away from her right as she walked by me, jauntily heading toward the stairs.

Before she left, she spun around to wave. "Tell me if anything happens, 'kay?"

I bowed, implicitly expressing, *It kinda seems like you're saying that to me, but nothing is gonna happen to me, 'cause I wasn't invited*, and watched her go.

Now that all the chattery women were gone, there was silence.

It was only me and Hayama left.

But so what if we were here together? It wasn't like there was anything for us to do.

We had nothing to talk about.

The two of us had spoken in the past, but we were done with that now. Though we had similar goals and ideas, I understood exactly how divided we were, and that was why I had no hope of changing that.

We probably wouldn't have any further contact in the future. I could tell that clearly from his and his friends' attitudes that morning. We had both made that choice.

I grabbed my bag and started walking.

"You…" His voice came at my back, so quiet it could vanish

any second.

There was no reason for me to talk. But my feet stopped on their own. I waited for him to continue, without turning around.

"…Haruno likes you."

"What?" My head jerked around at the unexpected remark. When our eyes met, he chuckled. It made me feel uncomfortably transparent, and I faced forward again. "Don't be dumb. She's just messing with me."

"I think she's interested in you, at least." Hayama's voice reached me from behind. His tone changed suddenly. "She doesn't mess with anyone she's not interested in… She wouldn't do anything in that case. If she likes you, she'll kill you with attention. If she hates you, she'll destroy you."

Was that advice or a warning? The words were barbed, that was for sure. I was curious as to his expression then, but still, I didn't turn around.

"…That's scary."

But that honest impression, that fact I'd realized long ago, slipped out of me.

X X X

Rolling on and on down the national highway at night on my bicycle, I finally returned to my neighborhood. It hadn't even been a day, but already, I missed it dearly.

I got home and opened the front door, and for once, Kamakura came to greet me. He made a half-hearted *mraah*, rubbing his head and body all over my legs.

You'll get cat hair on my uniform; cut that out.

"Hey, what's up?" I asked, but kitties don't talk, and he made a displeased huffing sound, and coupled with his meow, it came out like *meow-rrrng*. What's up with that? Is it a greeting, like "meowning"?

"C'mon, let's go," I said to the cat and went up the stairs.

The lights on the second floor were off.

Our parents wouldn't be home yet, and it seemed Komachi had yet to return, too. She'd probably gone to cram school. Entrance exams were looming in three months.

There was already cat hair on my uniform, so I decided to get changed into the tracksuit I wore at home. I took my uniform off and tossed it somewhere, then headed for the living room. As I did, I didn't forget to bring in the donuts I'd bought as a souvenir. I hoped this would cheer her up a bit.

And there, as if he'd been waiting for me, was Kamakura yet again, softly mewling in an aggressive bid for attention.

"What, you still want something?"

Mraa, replied Kamakura, heading toward the back of the kitchen.

There was a bowl there with wooden letters stuck to it. At a glance, it looked like a bowl made by Kadokawa, but no, it was Kamakura's food bowl, handmade by Komachi.

At the moment, there was only crumbs and kibble dust in it.

"…No food, huh?"

Hey, so you didn't come to greet me? The whole time, you were just whining for food? You're not cute at all, you know.

I pulled the sort of *Silver Spoon*-ish kibble they say makes cats come running from a bin at the back of the kitchen and poured it noisily into his bowl. You know, the way this stuff looks, you might pour milk on it and expect it to taste like chocolate.

Immediately after I started pouring in the kibble, Kamakura shoved his head in the stream, so I didn't know if I was pouring it into the bowl or onto the cat's head.

"Make sure you actually chew." I gave Kamakura one last pat, wiped off the dust stuck to his head, and staggered over to the sofa, where I flopped straight down.

I sighed deeply.

Then I did it again, and again, like this was some kind of deep breathing exercise.

When I lay there without even twitching, Kamakura came up to my feet with a quiet *mew*.

I figured he'd come over to report to me that he'd finished eating, but then he climbed onto my legs where I was sitting on the couch. With a satisfied-sounding *fumf* sort of exhale, he started purring.

"…Huh. So you can actually be considerate, huh?" He was probably just cold and using me as a hot-water bottle, but, well, I'd give him the benefit of the doubt this time.

As I ran my fingers through the fur on his back, gradually, my

eyelids became heavier.

It's been a long day.

I'm really worn out.

4

Quietly, **Yukino Yukinoshita** resolves herself.

I was awoken by a stabbing chill.

"…Cold."

When I squirmed away from the sofa, a blanket slid off me.

It seemed I'd fallen asleep there the night before. I did remember my mom griping at me—*If you fall asleep there, you'll catch a cold,* or something like that. However, her admonition had been in vain, as I'd apparently fallen right back asleep. Since I vaguely remembered this exchange, I must have said something in response, but I guess in the end, I'd fallen asleep on the sofa. My companion Kamakura had disappeared at some point, too. He must have been sleeping somewhere warmer.

Creaking with stiffness in my neck, shoulders, and back, I got up and spotted breakfast ready on the table.

Munching on the food as I looked around the house, I found my parents had already left, and Komachi had gone to school, too, leaving me as the straggler. The takeaway donuts I'd left on the table had decreased in number by a few, meaning someone had eaten some.

As I changed into my school uniform, the chill in the air pierced my body. It was getting stronger every day. *Maybe I really have caught a cold…or did I not get enough sleep because I slept in a funny position?*

I had a bit of a headache, too. *Do we have any painkillers around?* I fished through the cabinet, found what I'd been looking for, and took it.

Nwhooaaaaa! This medishine is shoo gooood!

Phew, you've gotta do that whenever you take medicine, really.

I left the house, repeating “It’s cold, it’s so freaking cold” like I was muttering in delirium or something, pedaling my bike to school.

The day before had been the first day of school after the field trip, so there had still been this kind of giddy atmosphere, but now that school was back to normal, that feeling had vanished somewhere far away.

Before me was the same familiar scenery of nearly two years now: the school gates, parking lot, and entrance. But I didn’t feel attached to any of it, strangely.

Approaching the entrance, I ran into Yuigahama.

“Ah… M-morning.”

“Uh-huh.” We exchanged a brief greeting and headed to the classroom. Her footsteps following me from behind were more reserved than usual.

I heard a sigh slip out of her. It was slightly choked, as if something were caught in the back of her throat. I made every effort to ignore it and continue on down the hallway.

As we approached the stairs, the crowd thinned out somewhat. As if she’d been waiting for this moment, Yuigahama trotted up the stairs two at a time to line up beside me. “T-today…will you…be going to the clubroom?” she asked, probing, the words faltering on their way out of her mouth.

But my reply was obvious. “No, I won’t,” I said.

As if she’d known how I would respond, she immediately smoothed things over with a smile. “Y-yeah… U-um, we’re thinking we’ll talk with Iroha-chan a little more, um, like to firm up some kind of plan, so…”

I inferred from the way she spoke that she’d be working with Yukinoshita. The two of them had probably discussed things the day before, after I’d left.

It took Yuigahama only a few steps’ worth of time to say the rest of what she had to say. “And if you didn’t know, Hikki, it’d be kinda like, you know, so…”

That *you know* held a lot of meaning. It was the sort of vague wording that made you want to sniff out exactly what she wanted to say. But looking at Yuigahama beside me as she spoke, her face turned downward, I could understand that she had no other way to express herself.

I should have been used to walking these stairs, but they felt

particularly long.

"Aren't you…?" The words suddenly popped out of my mouth.

"Huh?"

"…No, it's nothing." I'd started to say, *Aren't you angry?* but then stopped. Just how awkward could I be? Pathetic.

How could I fail to pick up on that much?

Yuigahama wanted to keep things the way they had been by spending her time the same as she always had.

That should be in agreement with what I had done.

You bury it out in the yard, act like it's okay, make it so it's never happened, and go back to how you lived before. And then eventually, once it can no longer be taken back, once it's gone and forgotten, you will regretfully think, *Oh, this was how it was back then*, and tell yourself it was a bittersweet memory.

"…Well, if it's just to hear what you guys say," I said, right when we were shy of the top of the steps. I immediately turned the hallway corner, so I didn't catch her reply.

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Class ended, and the other students left the room in clusters. Of course, some stayed behind to hang out and chat, and some would talk for a while before they went to their clubs.

I quickly got myself ready to go, then sat there in my chair, taking a few deep breaths. I couldn't go straight home.

Since attendance to the Service Club had become voluntary, there was nothing compelling me there. But just as I'd discussed with Yuigahama when I'd come to school that morning, I had to go to the service clubroom to hear what Isshiki had to say.

Frankly speaking, the plan I had in mind could be carried out regardless of Isshiki's intentions or her situation, so I didn't really need to hear this. But still, the direction Yukinoshita and Yuigahama took their approach could affect my plans somewhat. So the main point of this was, if anything, to hear what the two of them would say.

How long had it been since I'd directly opposed Yukinoshita? This was like when we'd first met, when we'd been criticizing every little thing about each other's methods. Though actually, I feel like

that was more my way of doing things being criticized.

Yeah. Thinking about it that way, this was more of the same. Yet again, Yukinoshita was rejecting my methods. So then the format here hadn't changed—the old status quo had been maintained.

If nothing had changed, then there was no problem.

Coming to this conclusion, I stood from my seat.

I took a covert look around the classroom. Nobody was here, aside from a few people chatting. It seemed Yuigahama had already left.

I went out into the hallway and headed to the special-use building. School had only just ended, so this area should have been full of cultural clubs doing their thing, but the hallway was particularly vacant. Thinking about it, I hadn't walked down this hallway last year around this time. I discovered for the first time how cold the air wafting through was in late fall.

Coming to the clubroom door, I opened it without hesitation.

"Oh, you came…," Yuigahama said. She looked over at me with an expression of relief.

There were two others in the clubroom. Yukinoshita glanced at me. She must have been writing something, as she immediately returned her attention to the paper in her hands.

The other person present, Iroha Isshiki, was sitting opposite from Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. She spun her whole body around to look at me and gave me this curious look like, *Who is this guy again?* And then, like she was saying, *Guess I'll just smile, then*, she beamed and gave me a casual bow.

Well, no surprise there. Given her position, I'm sure I'm a creature of little importance. Especially since she's usually hanging around Hayama and his crowd, so she's also associated with the top caste.

But in spite of that, she didn't blatantly ignore me, and that made me feel like she understood how to get on in the world. Frankly speaking, if this had been me a long time ago, I'm confident that this alone would have been enough for me to develop a crush on her. Let me put it another way—that somewhat cunning side of her had to be what had gotten the other girls fed up with her, leading us to where we were now.

I replied with a casual bow of my own and sat in my usual seat. Then Yukinoshita opened her mouth. "Well, let's hear what you

have to say."

Isshiki hadn't said anything yet? I flicked my eyes over to the clock to see a fair bit of time had passed since the end-of-class bell had rung. I'd told Yuigahama that morning I would come, so apparently, they had waited for me.

"…Sorry to make you wait," I said.

Yukinoshita closed her eyes, not looking at me. "…It's all right." She didn't say anything after that.

When a strange and uncomfortable silence fell, Yuigahama smiled in embarrassment and turned back to Isshiki. "Um, sorry to make you come here. Weren't you busy with your club?"

"No, not at all! Plus, when I told Hayama I had some important stuff to do, he let me go," Isshiki replied cheerfully, leaning forward a bit as she continued. "But wait, Yui, you're in the same class as Hayama, right? Did you tell him about me?"

"Huh? …Hmm, I don't really feel like I did." Mouth half-open, Yuigahama tilted her head as she searched her memories, but it seemed there was nothing relevant.

Hearing this, Isshiki sullenly fell into thought. "…Is that right? He let me go so easily, I wondered if he'd heard something."

Agh, I get it. Inferring from her comments, Isshiki liked Hayama.

So she wanted to make sure that he'd let her slip out of club easily because he knew what her situation was and *Not at all because he doesn't need me or anything, right?*

Hey, I can kind of understand those feelings, so, man, this is hard to comment on. If you're gonna read into the things people do and say, then read into it and no more, you know?! Because discovering the truth just hurts.

If even I was noticing Isshiki's feelings on this matter, of course Yuigahama would notice, too. She made an *Oh, crap!* face, then immediately attempted to smooth over the situation. "Oh, but this is Hayato, so if he knows he'd, like, you know, I think he'd be considerate in all sorts of ways! So even if he was concerned, he'd actually be like…you know?"

"Y-yeah, you're right!"

Yuigahama and Isshiki both laughed it off. *Ha-ha-ha!*

Yukinoshita, who had been watching their exchange with disinterest, identified that the conversation had reached a break. "Yuigahama," she said, "let's get started."

"Yeah, okay. We're going to decide on our plan, so could we

talk about things?”

When Yuigahama got to the subject at hand, Isshiki replied with a drawn-out “Okaaay!”

“So here’s what we think is best. First, we set up another candidate besides you, and you run against them. Then you lose to them in a ballot without a fuss. But does that sound good?”

“Yeah, like, a ballot could do it, huh? Oh, but if possible, it’d personally be pretty sweet to lose to someone great!” Isshiki replied cheerfully, though it seemed she’d hardly considered the matter.

Though Yuigahama was the one explaining the plan, that idea was the one Yukinoshita had brought up the day before. The two of them must have discussed it and settled on this. Now they would confirm what Isshiki wanted and then work out further details.

That much was fine. But the problem still remained. “Have you found a candidate?” I asked.

“Well, not yet…” At a loss for words, Yuigahama turned away.

Well, it wasn’t like they were going to decide in one day. What was important was the deadline for deciding. “How much longer is the application open for additional candidates?”

“Monday, the week after next. But still, we’re already past the original deadline, so we shouldn’t wait until then to decide. That’s the only day they’re taking applications. The election is the Thursday of that week,” Yukinoshita replied instantly, though I’d meant to ask that of Yuigahama. Her eyes were down on the paper on the table, and there were no signs of emotion in the minimal information she offered.

Loosely folding my arms, I calculated the time between that day’s date and the deadline.

It was Tuesday. It was also after school, so I should assume that the real attempt to find a candidate wouldn’t start until the next day. Considering they couldn’t do anything on weekends, they didn’t have much time. Taking into account the documents for application and collecting the list of nominators, that meant their time was even more limited. And they had to find someone who surpassed Iroha Isshiki, to boot.

“So you find a candidate, convince them, and come up with at least thirty nominators. And then there’s the election campaign…,” I murmured, thinking aloud.

Yukinoshita replied coldly, “I’m aware we don’t have much time left.” Then she lifted her chin, which had been tilted

downward until then, and said to Isshiki, “So then, I intend to proceed with everything else…Isshiki.”

“R-right.” Isshiki seemed flustered as she replied. I supposed a soft and ditzy type like her would have trouble dealing with brisk types like Yukinoshita. She quickly adjusted her posture, sitting up straight. Although her fingers were still plucking her overlong sleeves, her hands fidgeting with her somewhat short skirt slightly, I couldn’t see much anxiety in those gestures.

Isshiki gave Yukinoshita a solemn look, telling her she was ready to listen, and with those eyes on her, Yukinoshita began. “No matter how we do this, you’ll have to be standing up there for the campaign speech, Isshiki.”

“Agh, well, that’s fine…”

Well, it seemed like she was used to being the focus of attention. But she didn’t sound like she understood at all, which bothered me. That would make some trouble for me, too. Just as Yukinoshita said, Isshiki would be going up to the podium for the plan I was thinking of, too.

“The campaign speech is an announcement of your campaign promises, and I believe that will be your focal point during the speech. Though I doubt anyone will be listening very closely…” Her words sounded self-deprecating, somehow. She seemed to be implying something else, but before I could think about it, Yukinoshita continued. “I believe it would be preferable for you to present a different campaign pledge in your speech from the one for the candidate we arrange. If the pledges are too similar, the vote will become a popularity contest, so I want to ensure there’s something else to set you apart.”

If they could find someone to back who was even more popular than Isshiki, that would be ideal, but if they couldn’t, and it ended up a vote of popularity, that would make it a tough fight for someone who wasn’t as well-known. If the candidates were saying the same thing, people would choose whoever looked better. Who is speaking matters more than the message.

Isshiki and Yuigahama were going “Hmm, hmm” and nodding as if maybe they understood and maybe they didn’t.

Concerned by their reactions, Yukinoshita held out a piece of paper. “This is what I thought up for the election pledges and the speech. Please take a look. It would be helpful if you would use this as a reference to come up with something different.”

From behind, I peered at the paper Isshiki took from her.

"…Um, is this it?" Isshiki said with surprise, skimming over it. Indeed, the content, written in meticulous handwriting, was brief and not what you might expect from Yukino Yukinoshita.

There were two election promises: the establishment of a room for students to research and prepare for university, and the relaxation of standards for the provision of club funds. For the club expenses, it was exactly what it said on the tin and easy to understand. As for the other promise, the university prep room, looking over the text, I got the gist of it.

It seemed to refer to the systematization and storing of academic know-how through the supply and loan of past problem collections and the creation of a database of old routine tests, for the sake of supporting students' studies. It wasn't simply about establishing a reference room—the key point was that the breadth was expanded to include routine tests. Being able to get extra points on those tests would be reassuring for those students who were aiming for recommendations to their schools of choice.

It seemed this stance was meant to accommodate both those in clubs and those focusing on entrance exams.

"Ohhh," murmured Isshiki as she scrutinized the paper, but those two points were all that Yukinoshita had written there.

Observing this, Yuigahama combed at her bun. "Well, I thought it might not be enough, too."

"With this sort of thing, quantity isn't the issue. Even one would work," Yukinoshita said with a smile at Yuigahama. It was a peaceful expression that made her look more mature than usual.

I got her point. That was pretty much all anyone would actually care about in the speech. You could say a lot, but nobody would be listening anyway. It was important to narrow it down to the points they would hear.

But still, I thought it was suspicious that she seemed strangely familiar with this until I suddenly remembered about Yukinoshita's family. Her father was a prefectural assembly member or something, wasn't he? So she may have been familiar with elections and speeches and things of that nature. Meaning it was fine for her to be proposing these election promises.

What bothered me was what would come next.

"…Hey, so if you guys are coming up with the campaign pledges, that means you're arranging a total puppet candidate. Are

you okay with that?"

"…" Yukinoshita had been faintly smiling, but now a shadow fell over her expression. It seemed I'd hit a sore point, and she fell silent.

Yuigahama and Isshiki looked over at me, seeking explanation.

"If your plan goes well, then that's fine. Though I don't think that's realistic… But if the candidate you guys set up manages to get elected, what about the management of the student council after that? Are you going to keep helping them? The whole time?" Even though I didn't mean to be accusatory, my tone got sharper with each word.

Yuigahama cut me off. "S-so then, we should just look for someone who can do the job properly."

"That just makes your task even harder. If you consider further down the road, there's not much point in that method, and it's not a very good one to begin with." This wasn't only about this election. It would also involve the management of student council from here on out, too. Yukinoshita and Yuigahama's idea still wouldn't be enough to resolve it.

I couldn't see the point.

Yukinoshita's gaze dropped to the desk, and I couldn't see her expression. Face tilted down, delicate fingers tightly laced together, her thin shoulders didn't even twitch.

But after a small breath, I heard her minutely trembling voice. "…So then what's the point of your idea?" she asked.

I came up with no answer right away. It was late in the game to be asking that question, but I still didn't have an answer ready.

What point was there in it?

There was no point.

There's never any meaning in putting things off, dragging them out, and ultimately wasting everything. That's what my methods accomplish. I didn't need anyone telling me that at this point—I understood it myself.

But there are problems that can only be eliminated that way. In some cases, this is the most effective method.

That is a fact.

If that could be said of this matter as well, then it was clear what I would say.

"If we assume it's just this once, then it'd avoid the problem for the time being. After she loses the vote of confidence, for the

follow-up election, we step back and leave things to their natural course. That's the right answer."

"Just this once? No. It's not only this time." Yukinoshita didn't sound delicate like she had before. Her voice was severe, accusatory, and cold.

After looking down all this time, she raised her face.

Her eyes were burning blue. The sharp light of her eyes wouldn't allow me to turn away. Her gaze was so direct, it was as if it was stabbing me in the neck with an icicle, capturing me and refusing to let go.

I couldn't help but gulp.

Yukinoshita bit her lip—as if she was trying to swallow her words. "…You avoided the issue the same way, last time." She spoke so, so quietly, but her voice echoed in my ears.

It was like my whole brain was being shaken inside my skull.

In my mind's eye, I could see a bamboo forest illuminated by crisp blue moonlight, branches and leaves rustling in the cold wind.

In an attempt to shake that off, I unconsciously swept back my hair. "So…is there a problem with that?"

I had not resolved or canceled out the matter of the school field trip. But the problem had been masked. The result, an evasion, wasn't something that would satisfy everyone. In fact, I'd arranged the matter to be dealt with by *not* satisfying everyone.

That was why no one could blame me for my actions then.

Aside from her.

The sharp light in her glare did not dim or shift away from me.

Her tightly pressed lips trembled. “You were the one who said there was no meaning in that kind of superficiality…” Her cold, soft voice sounded so sorrowful, somehow. I had to look away. Her piercing remark, her words, was the one thing I had no reply for.

Because I’m sure that was the one conviction Hachiman Hikigaya and Yukino Yukinoshita had shared.

When I failed to say anything, she sighed in resignation. “You have no intention of changing, do you?”

“…No.” I could answer that without hesitation.

I would not change. I could not change.

“U-um…” Yuigahama opened her mouth in an attempt to do something about the tension. But her eyes wandered all over like she was searching for something to say. Her gaze wavered between the two of us.

The seconds ticked by with an icy chill. Yukinoshita and I were both starkly silent.

Isshiki looked at over at Yuigahama uncomfortably. She didn’t know me or Yukinoshita, so Yuigahama would be the only one for her to turn to when things were awkward.

But eventually, Yuigahama was at a loss as to what to say, too.

Before she could find her words, I stood from my seat. “…I should get going. I get the gist of what’s happening.”

There was nothing for me to gain from staying in the clubroom any longer. Just plenty to lose.

The sound of my indoor shoes ticked out a light rhythm in the quiet room. Nobody moved aside from me.

The few steps to the door didn’t feel long—probably because I was making an effort not to think about anything. Or maybe I was thinking so much, I wasn’t even conscious of the time.

After closing the door behind me, I walked down the hallway for a while, and then the soft sound of a door sliding open cut through the silence. I turned around automatically to find Iroha Isshiki there. My shoulders slumped. It was less out of disappointment and more like relief. I wasn’t confident that I could speak well to the others right then.

She trotted up to me. “Um, is it okay for me to leave this to you…?” she asked, lowering her voice for the benefit of the clubroom behind her. Her question sounded worried. Having come to consult with us, she’d witnessed a vague skirmish that couldn’t even be called an argument. Her unease was understandable. “If a decent enough person did show up, then it would be easier for me. I’d rather do that, but…”

“Then it’d have to be someone on Hayama’s level.”

“It can’t be him!”

Of course not… I really doubt he’d do it… “…Well, worst case, we’ll manage. It’ll work out somehow, even on the day of,” I said.

But Isshiki’s mistrust was transparent in her vague response. “Agh, I don’t want to just lose, though…” Still, she seemed to make an effort to smooth that over, putting her hands together in front of her chest with a cute smile. “But you’ve been a help. I mean, nobody else’ll help me. You guys are the only ones I can rely on!”

If I hadn’t known anything, that gesture and manner of speaking would have stirred up protective feelings. But since I understood this was a skill she used to get by, I didn’t really feel anything.

She’s different from the Kaori Orimoto type. She’s motivated entirely by how others see her—how boys see her, specifically.

“Fluffy-cute me” vs. “forthright and cool me.”

Whichever you choose, you’re just slapping a character on yourself, and personal feelings have nothing to do with it. Once you’ve established that character, you have to take actions that are consistent with it.

Therefore, she’d act that same way toward me, too. There was no meaning beyond that.

I wouldn’t say this was proof, but she clapped her hands with an “Oh!” as if she’d remembered something, then hopped away from me. “I still have my club, so I have to go. Thanks!” She casually raised a hand and then trotted away. Her lack of attachment was a vivid representation of her lack of interest in me.

I’m sure a long time ago, I would have attached some meaning even to this sort of trivial conversation.

I’d really only grown in the worst ways. I had to laugh at myself.

5

Right to the end, **Hayato Hayama** just can't understand it.

A few days had passed since my conversation with Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and Isshiki in the clubroom.

During that time, my life had consisted of going back and forth between home and school. Whenever I got home, I spent my time without seeing Komachi or having any real conversations. The only one I talked to was the cat, Kamakura. Once the end-of-day homeroom was over that day, too, I'd return home without going by the clubroom.

Homeroom ended as I was ruminating over these thoughts, ignoring what my teacher was saying.

I grabbed my bag and stood. The chatter around me told me that Yuigahama was still in the classroom. I fixed my head at a slightly downward angle and walked quickly so as to avoid seeing her.

When I approached the door, suddenly, a hand fell on my shoulder. "Do you have a minute?"

I turned around to see Hayama's breezy smile. "…What?" I replied.

Hayama glanced around a bit before beckoning to me. It seemed he wanted to have some secret talk.

But I didn't really want to lean in close to him. *I mean, Ebina's still in the classroom… That sort of thing is…kinda…embarrassing…*

Well, whatever. There couldn't be any secrets for me and Hayama to talk about, because normally, we didn't even talk at all. If there was something for us to talk about, it'd be what happened during the school field trip. But I doubted either of us would talk about that again.

I didn't lean toward him, prompting him with my gaze to continue.

He smiled with a hint of embarrassment. Then he gave up and shrugged. It seemed he'd decided to just talk. "It's about Orimoto and Nakamachi from the other day."

"Uh-huh." *Oh yeah, Haruno wound up introducing him to those girls a while ago, huh? What, is he having problems because they're hitting on him? Unfortunately, there's nothing I can do for him there.*

However, Hayama didn't say anything like that. "I wanted to talk to you a bit about Saturday."

"Sure." Saturday, huh? Saturday. If we're talking about Saturday, it's gotta be about that. It's the day before Super Hero Time. In other words, he must have been talking about *Jewelpet Sunshine* and *Pretty Rhythm*. *What, you're checking what time they're airing? It's in the morning, okay? You should know that without having to ask me about it.*

Or so I thought, but of course Hayama wouldn't be asking me about that.

So then what does he mean, Saturday…*?*

As I was mulling over this, Hayama gave me a questioning look. "Did you not hear about it, then? We were texting, and then they invited me to go hang out downtown on Saturday."

"No, I didn't hear about this…"

Going to hang out? That was no one I know.

And, like, I never got any of these messages in the first place, you know? I never even got their contact info. Back when I'd sent Orimoto an e-mail saying I'd changed my address, it had never reached her.

So of course I wouldn't get invited! Ohhh! They couldn't invite me because they didn't know my e-mail! What shy girls!

Of course not.

It went without saying that I was not invited.

But Hayama must not have understood that, as he tilted his head. "Really…? I thought for sure they meant with everyone."

I'm sure that's the way it was, in his mind. *Everyone getting along peacefully* is basically this guy's motto. "That's just a pretext to make you go. And there's no reason for someone who wasn't invited to go in the first place. You should do what you want, right?"

"So you weren't invited…" Hayama nodded, then continued with a smile. "Why don't you come with us? It'd be nice to have

more people."

"Of course I'm not going…" *Is this guy stupid?* If I was never invited in the first place, then I'd be a party crasher. I knew for certain that the moment I showed up, they'd look at me like, *Why is he here?* Besides, there was another problem, aside from how Orimoto and her friend would react. "Plus, do you think I would go hang out with you?" I said.

Hayama withdrew his smile and turned serious. Of course, I was wearing a similar expression.

Being of different social classes, ranks, and circumstances, I couldn't imagine us choosing to meet outside of school. If someone who knew who we were at school happened to see us, they'd be confused. Heck, you wouldn't even have to leave school for that. This current conversation was irregular enough already.

Besides, this combination was impossible not only on an objective basis but also based on subjective consideration, too.

I hadn't forgotten the pity Hayama showed me after that incident.

The moment a clear distinction is made between superior and inferior, that authoritatively indicates a division between them. I wouldn't be permitted to cross that line, and neither would I allow Hayama to trespass on my side.

The world is intolerant, and so am I.

An onlooker would have seen us standing in silence, glaring at each other.

Hayama was the one to break the silence. "It would really help me out if you did…so would you please come?" Surprisingly, he bowed his head. I couldn't see his expression because his face was pointing down, but looking at his tightly clenched fists, I could tell he wasn't smiling.

I didn't know what he was thinking, bowing his head like this. But I still wasn't going to let him tell me what to do. "My presence wouldn't help you at all, and you're not the kind of guy who needs help in the first place," I said.

Hayama's shoulders moved slightly, but he didn't lift his head.

"…Besides, I don't like going out on weekends anyway. Oh, hey. Take your friends or something and introduce them. Then everything should work out fine." I said my last sentence over my shoulder as I left the classroom.

"I get it…," I heard him mutter quietly the moment before I

closed the door.

X X X

When I got home, I flopped around on the sofa until midnight. Leaving the TV on, I opened a book and played a game on my phone in one hand. This wonder trade thing is such a godly system—and so kind to loners.

My parents came home late and griped at me a bunch, but I gave them some half-assed replies like “Uh-huh” and “Hmm,” and eventually, they gave up on me.

Normally, I’d go to bed right away or focus on reading a book, but lately, nothing would distract me.

Regardless, once it was around midnight, as you might expect, I finally started to get tired. I stretched wide on the sofa and yawned, and that was when the living room door opened. I looked over, thinking the cat must have learned how to open doors on his own, but instead I saw a grumpy-looking Komachi standing there in her nightcap and pajamas.

As I was struggling to decide whether I should say something to her, she opened her mouth first. “Bro. Phone.”

“Huh?” Her sudden remark made me take out my cell phone, but I saw no call and no e-mails, and also not much battery life, either. *Come on, this phone stinks.*

So then I turned back to Komachi, silently asking what the heck she was talking about. And a cell phone flew at me. I barely managed to catch it before it hit me in the face. Then I realized it was Komachi’s.

“Komachi’s gonna sleep. When you’re done, leave it there.”

“O-okay.”

Before she’d even finished speaking, Komachi retreated to her own room.

I looked at her cell phone, which remained in my hand. On-screen was the *on hold* display. *Guess I’ll pick up, then.* I didn’t know who the call was from, but if they had Komachi’s number, they had to be someone respectable. I accepted the call and put the phone to my ear, but I was still somewhat cautious as I said into the speaker, “…Hello?”

“Hyahallo!” A particularly cheerful greeting flew into my ear, making me want to instantly hang up. I drew the phone away from my face and checked the screen again to see *Haruno Yukinoshita* written there.

Why is she calling? And wait, how does she know Komachi’s number…? As I was glaring at the cell phone with suspicion, I could hear her call, “Heeey.”

But now that I’d answered the phone, I was stuck. Resigned, I put the phone to my ear again. “Do you need something?” I asked.

She responded with another question that had nothing to do with the one I’d asked. “Did you have a fight with your sister?”

Had Komachi said something, or had something given her that hint? Of course, sisters of many years would never fight. Witnessing that stuff gives me a stomachache, so please don’t.

“Compared with your family, it hardly counts as a fight,” I said with some irony, and Haruno laughed into the phone.

“Ah-ha-ha, I see.”

“And hey, how did you get Komachi’s number in the first place?”

“Oh, you know, we met briefly after the cultural festival, right? We swapped numbers then.”

So that’s when it happened, huh…? I think that was the first time Haruno and Komachi had properly talked, and apparently, they’d very shrewdly exchanged numbers, too. Once again, unbeknownst to me, my sister had expanded her social network. Does she know my own acquaintances’ contact info better than I do?

“Anyway, I heard you were invited on a date, but you’re not going?”

“I wasn’t invited…” *What’s with this woman—did she call me just to shove reality in my face? Or wait, did Hayama talk to her about this? That’s going too far…*

As I was considering earnestly explaining how I had not been invited, she told me with some mild kindness, “Hayato’s invited you, so you should go.”

“Uh, I’m not going…”

In the first place, it was illogical. If I went, then the girls would try to be polite for Hayama and avoid giving me nasty looks. His presence would actually make them start being considerate to me and saying stuff like, *You really don’t have to force yourself! There’ll be another time!* and they’d even help make it easier for me to

announce I was leaving. Whoa, what the heck, which class reunion of mine is this?

"It's so nice, though. Going on a date with the girl you once liked is so romantic," she said with a teasing giggle.

"I wouldn't call what happened actually liking her," I answered instantly, and her question came back at me without a pause.

"What was it, then?"

I didn't even have to bother thinking about it. I'd already pondered it to death between middle school and now. The words slid out smoothly. "I was just putting my desires on her. It was like a misunderstanding, and I wouldn't call that anything real."

She'd only spoken to me, just paid me a little attention, and I'd somehow become interested and believed she liked me. As a result, I'd gotten the wrong idea. The idea that she liked me had ultimately only been about me liking her. That sort of egotism is very far from romantic feelings.

Confessing those feelings and labeling them with the word *like* is just a way to define them. If you were to ask what the truth was, I wasn't really sure. And all the more so now.

There was a sigh on the other end of the line.

Haruno paused for a long while, as if she was considering this. Then she giggled at me. I couldn't see her, but I could still easily imagine her mouth twisting into an enchanting smile.

Even through the phone, I could easily hear her voice. "You're like a monster of reason."

"What's that supposed to mean? No, I'm not." I snorted. It was a strangely cool nickname to receive.

"Oh? Then you're a monster of self-consciousness," Haruno replied, and there was no mirth in her voice then. I could tell she was speaking very seriously.

Was that why her words made a strange kind of sense to me?

It's true that an incorrigible amount of self-consciousness is swirling about inside me—probably so much that even my own self-consciousness would want to deny it. It made me imagine a monster trapped in the dead end of some mazelike place of myth. Did it get killed by the hero in the end?

Before I could start brooding, her voice scooped me out of those thoughts with particular cheer as she said, "Anyway! Make sure to go on that date. Okay?"

"Uh, it's not really a good day, though." That line comes out of

my mouth right away, even when I'm zoning out. It's aaautooomaaatiiic.

"That's why we made it on Friday. You don't like going out on weekends, right?" But my foe was not one to be taken lightly, either, as she immediately struck back against my excuse.

Wait, why does she know what I said? Did Hayama tell her that, too? And hey, how can she go and decide this for me? "Uh, that day's also kinda…"

"…But you went out with Yukino-chan. Oh, and with Gahama-chan, too," she said, reminding me of early that summer and of summer vacation.

For some reason, Haruno had also happened to be present both those times. Well, I guess she's just one of those people who's "got it." Very rarely, there are people who naturally draw to themselves the things that would entertain them. All I can think of those people is that they just happened to be chosen.

But neither of those two events was a date or anything like one.

I'm sure there was a greater issue in either case.

I didn't know how I might correctly describe those events. I merely put together the words that came to mind. "…That was just like going shopping or running errands."

"And this is just going to hang out, right? You'll be nothing more than Hayama's chaperone. Simply walking in the same direction, so to speak," she said, and I had trouble replying to that. If you were going to attach special meaning to the act of going to hang out, that meant I would also have to find some special meaning in those old shopping trips slash errands.

As I was left speechless except for some pained noises, Haruno slammed me with yet another question. "Or…are you expecting a certain something to come from it, perhaps?"

"Of course not," I replied immediately. There's no way I'd have any expectations.

Playful laughter rang out on the other end. "So then there's no problem. Plus, Hayama doesn't normally bow his head to ask people favors."

"Is that right? He asks people favors quite a lot."

"But he doesn't bow. He's actually pretty proud, you know."

Is that right?

"If you don't come, I'll go pick you up at your house!"

The hell, is she like my childhood friend or what? Wait, does she

know where I live? That's scary. Which reminds me, the Yukinoshita sisters are childhood friends with Hayama, huh?

As I was distracted by my impressions of an irrelevant situation, she hung up on me. She says her piece, huh? What a selfish person. But I guess that's just who Haruno Yukinoshita is.

I put the cell phone on the table, as Komachi had told me to. I could've gone to her room to return it, but she'd probably respond like she had earlier. She'd also said she was going to bed, so even if I went to her room and called out to her, she probably wouldn't reply… Well, she was probably pretending to sleep, though.

The long phone call had made me a little tired.

I was about to sink into the sofa again but changed my mind. I felt like I'd fall asleep there again like I had the other day. It'd be best to go to my own bed while I was awake. That would also make it easier for Komachi to come get her phone.

As I left the living room, I opened and closed the door a bit more noisily than I had to, returning to my room to fall into bed.

I looked up at the ceiling.

Though all of this was built on pretense, I had been roped into going to hang out with girls—and with one I'd confessed to a long time ago.

But still, it wasn't as if I felt anything in particular. As an existence less than air, I would just be waiting for the time to pass. You might say it was like one of those sign-holding jobs. You stand there the whole time, doing nothing but waiting as time goes by.

This was something similar. I was Hayama's escort—that's it. A side item. Less than pickled vegetables in a boxed lunch. I couldn't even become Saran wrap. Nor could I become Baran and fire off Draura.

X X X

Until the day I was supposed to be going to hang out with Hayama and the girls, I received no contact whatsoever. Well, you might point out that of course I didn't, since they had no way of contacting me, and yes that was true, but it was still kinda fishy… What a pungent side-item feeling. I think the only added items that get treated as carelessly as me are food additives.

I went to school, and as usual, as I entered the classroom, I smoothly assimilated into the air around me. I sat down at my desk, and some time passed.

Hayama was at the back of the class as usual, surrounded by his friends: Tobe, Miura, Yuigahama, and the others. They were chatting about something as usual, and I didn't get even a hint of an impression that he was going to go hang out with some other girls that day.

He was probably used to this sort of thing. Even though I, the mere side dish, was all like, *I wonder when he's gonna text me (fidget, fidget)*…

This anxiety must have shown in my attitude, as Hayama noticed me, then wove between the desks to come to me. He stood in front of my seat and paused a moment as if unsure about how he should speak to me. In the end, he went for brief and inoffensive. "About today, around what time are you leaving?"

Why's he asking it like that…? Is he planning to go together…? "What about your club?" It was a weekday, and normally, Hayama had soccer practice, so he couldn't be telling me to wait until that was over, could he? Not happening.

But Hayama didn't seem to care as he answered, "No practice today. The grounds get crowded, so we sometimes cancel when that happens."

It was true that the sports field at our school wasn't that big. It was crowded with not only the soccer team but also the baseball, track, and rugby teams. There would be days like that sometimes.

"Oh, okay… Then if you could just tell me where we're meeting up." Regardless, there was no need for us to bother going from school to Chiba Station together. It'd be fine to meet up on the spot.

Besides, I didn't really want to be talking about this for too long. I noticed Yuigahama glancing over to look at me and Hayama talking, and I wanted to get this over with fast.

Once I said that, unsurprisingly, it seemed Hayama didn't intend to make me wait. He easily backed off, pulling out his cell phone instead. "Oh…so then can I ask your number just in case?"

"Sure." I scrawled it on the back of a printout. I often lose my phone at home, so I do remember my own number. After calling myself from the landline at home all the time, I've ended up memorizing it…

"Just the number? That's very like you." Typing in the number

I'd written down, Hayama's lips twitched in a smile.

Leave me alone. I don't e-mail people, so this is enough.

"See you later, then," he said. He finished entering it in his phone and then returned to his own seat. I didn't watch him go, leaning my face on my hand and closing my eyes.

About nine more hours until we meet at the station, huh? Now that it was actually time to hang out, it felt like more and more of a drag.

It seemed I would be spending the day with accelerating depression.

X X X

When the end-of-day homeroom was over, I left the classroom before anyone else.

Our designated meet-up point was by the digital screens for advertisements at Chiba Station. Orimoto and her friend would probably be coming by train, and the location was easy to understand, so that was fair enough.

However, it wasn't the sort of place you could hang around for a long time.

Since I'd headed straight to Chiba Station immediately after school, there was a little over an hour until the time we'd meet up. I locked up my bike in the nearby bicycle rack and decided to kill some time in a café a short walk away.

I went into the store, ordered a coffee, and sat by the window seat. There wasn't much heating around this spot, and I could feel the outside air, too. It made the coffee taste better.

Coffee tastes great when it's cold out. MAX Coffee tastes good year-round, but it's particularly special around this time. Other kinds of coffee are, well, they're decent around this time… Coffee is so bitter.

I put in my earbuds and opened my paperback. Being that this wasn't a stylish café, the relatively uninteresting clientele allowed me to relax.

I flipped through one page and then the next, as one song played, then the next.

When I reached my hand out to my cup, I found it had become

tepid.

The wristwatch peeking out from my sleeve showed the passage of time. I had a little while longer until we'd agreed to meet. As I lost myself in thought about what to do next, suddenly, a shadow fell between me and the streetlamp that illuminated the town at dusk.

There was a tapping on the glass.

I turned my face to see Haruno Yukinoshita on the other side, waving her hand.

…Why is she here?

She must have been saying something, as her lips were moving. Of course, there was glass between us, so I couldn't hear her, and when I tilted my head, she shrugged and came up to the entrance of the café.

Seeing Haruno Yukinoshita from an objective point of view, though, through a sheet of glass, really made me understand how she naturally drew attention. The guys passing by were giving her looks like, *That girl's cute*. And when she came into the café, she drew eyes, too.

She bought a coffee at the register and came straight over to sit in the seat opposite me.

"What are you doing…?" were the first words out of my mouth.

She poured milk and sugar into her cup and stirred it around with a spoon. Then she put on a wicked smile and chuckled gleefully.

Whoa, her smile is darker than coffee.

"This is the big date with my younger-brother figure and my future brother-in-law. Wouldn't any big sister be concerned?"

"Uh, I'm not gonna be your brother-in-law…"

By *younger-brother figure*, she must have meant Hayama. Being three years older than him, maybe she saw him like that. *But when you say it like that, it makes it sound like me and Hayama are on a date, so could you please not…?*

As I was wearily thinking these thoughts, she added, more to herself than to me, "Besides, I'm curious about the reason Hayato was so determined to bring you, you know?" Her smile was not the false grin she'd had before but a more frightening thin smile.

Having seen Hayama at school, though, I could sort of understand his rationale. Ultimately, he feels uneasy about causing someone to be ostracized. He must have been bothered that I hadn't

been invited, even though I was there when he met those girls.

That's why there wasn't really anything for Haruno to concern herself over. Rather, it was Haruno Yukinoshita who was my concern now. "You have a lot of spare time…"

When I voiced my ongoing suspicion, Haruno replied to me nonchalantly, "Sure I do; I'm a university student who's good at her studies and has money."

Whoa, she just came out and bragged about it.

University students have a lot of spare time on their hands, huh? Well, that's only those who don't have to work, or who aren't busy with homework or research, though.

But if that was true, wouldn't she spend more time having fun? I get the impression that university students who play around don't even go to school in the first place and drink all year long. They go to cherry blossom parties in spring, BBQs in summer, Halloween costume parties in fall, and in the winter, they have hot-pot parties and stuff. Like, their primary habitat is the homes of friends who live close to school. Or arcades or pachinko slot or mah-jongg parlors. If that's really what university is like, then I'm never gonna fit in there, though…

But Haruno doesn't come off that way, so then what does she do, usually…? Who knows? I thought as I asked what I was wondering. "Do you not have many friends?"

"No…so you're just about the only one who'll be friends with me…" She sniffled and sobbed in a really obviously fake way.

Whoa, obnoxious… But I doubted that was purely a joke.

Haruno is the type who's fine being alone. I mean, if you think about it, she's Yukinoshita's older sister, so it's obvious she'd be a solitary type.

I'm sure lots of people idolize her, or at least respect her for how well her mask hides the much darker reality underneath, and approach her with the desire to be friends. When I first met Haruno, I had seen her hanging out with some friends. But I suspect there are few people who could build a relationship with her on equal footing.

Maybe that's exactly why she's so persistent with her sister, being that Yukinoshita is in the position closest to herself.

Haruno must have been bothered by my sudden silence, as she said with a wry smile, "Well, that was a joke, but I'm not going to get in your way today, so don't worry."

Snapping out of my thoughts, I replied at once. “Oh. Yeah. Do what you want.”

“I didn’t expect to hear that.” Haruno blinked, puzzled. But that was nothing to be surprised about.

I didn’t mind if she was going to get in the way. In fact, I so didn’t mind, that I wanted her to come ruin this date as soon as possible. After all, if she did, I could go home early.

“Hmm, then I think I will. Whoops, it’s about time,” Haruno said, checking her watch. That prompted me to look at my wristwatch, too. It was indeed about time. If I left the café now, I wouldn’t be late.

Guess I’ll get going.

I quickly put together my things, though I hadn’t really pulled out much in the first place, and stood from my seat. Haruno, still seated, smiled. “Do your best, then!”

“Yeah, I’ll do my best not to get in the way.”

It seemed she wasn’t coming with me, which was what I was expecting. She must have meant to watch from a suitable distance.

“See you later!” Haruno sent me off, casually waving her hand in front of her chest.

Tilting my head a little, I replied with a nod, then left the café.

X X X

The sun had set now, and the city was beginning to show its nighttime face. The area in front of the station was full of people like me, waiting for others. It was Saturday night. Many of them would be about to go out drinking. Ahead, I saw a couple that had just met up exchange a few remarks, link arms, and walk off.

When I rolled up my sleeve to check the time, I saw it was five PM exactly. It was time for us to meet. Being the first one to come kiiinda made it seem like I was excited about this, which was unbearable. But then coming late would have made me a side item causing trouble.

I was in a really difficult position. I couldn’t make myself too prominent, but I also had to avoid becoming a burden, too. It seemed the coming few hours would be hard on my nerves.

Hayama was the first to come, soon after five. He must have

taken the train there, as he came through the ticket gates, jostling around in the flow of people. He really stuck out in a crowd, so he naturally caught my eye. After he looked around the area as he adjusted his bolo tie, he seemed to notice me. He raised his hand casually and came toward me. “Sorry I’m a little late.”

“No, you’re right on time.” One or two minutes is within the margin of error. I’m not that anal about time myself, so it didn’t bother me.

Now there’s just the girls…

I looked around, and Hayama, beside me, swiveled his head in the same way. As he did, he said, “…Sorry for making you come with me.” He seemed to be struggling to get the words out. “I *am* grateful, thank you.”

“It’s fine. I just came because I’m scared of Yukinoshita the elder. If you want to thank someone, thank her.” I really wouldn’t have come if Haruno hadn’t called me. It might be weird to say this myself, but I’m weak to getting chewed out by older women. I’m also weak to requests from my little sister. I struggle when classmates ask me for things, too. Ahhh, women really are scary.

I hadn’t anticipated Hayama would hit my weak spot like that, so it had been very effective. His buddy-buddy disease had taken things pretty far this time, and it was freaking me out a little. I wouldn’t call this advice, but I should be allowed to complain, at least. “So you’d even ask her to get me to—”

“Oh, isn’t that them?” Hayama cut me off. He was pointing pretty far away, but I could see Orimoto and her friend walking together. When they noticed us waiting, they rushed toward us.

“Sorry to make you wait!” Orimoto raised a hand in a manner that said she didn’t really care about the time, while her friend, Nakamachi, bowed her head apologetically.

“Sorry we’re late…”

“It’s all good… Let’s go, then.” Hayama gave an easy smile and then started walking, while Orimoto and her friend followed after him. He must have explained beforehand. Even now that the girls were with us, they didn’t look at me like, *Why are you here?*

“We were seeing a movie first, right?” Hayama turned around and slowed his pace a bit, adjusting to the girls’ smaller strides and closing the distance as he spoke to them.

I started walking one step behind the others. I wasn’t really going for the *yamato nadeshiko* thing. Yeah, I was staying a bit

behind partly out of consideration, but there was a greater reason for it.

Seeing the two girls had felt kind of strange.

If I were to put that feeling into words, it would be like an anticlimactic *Is this it?* Even if this was merely going through the motions of hanging out with girls, it was still a fairly big event for a teenage boy.

That was why it was surprising how off this felt.

I hadn't felt this way those times at the beginning of summer and during summer vacation, and I'd warned myself to never, ever get the wrong idea about it. But this time, I wasn't worried about that at all.

It's like, it's nothing to me, huh…?

In fact, my heart had been pattering harder when Hayama had shown up than when the girls arrived. Well, actually no, of course not.

On the way to the theater, I listened in silence to their conversation.

The plan for the day was to see a movie and go shopping. Then we'd stop by some arcades on the way, eat something, and go home. Something like that, apparently. It felt very standard.

And then, fifteen minutes after we'd begun.

So far, I'd only used six types of remarks: *Uh-huh*, *Uh-uh*, *I guess*, *Yeah*, *Right*, and *I see*. They use more words for the voice lines in fighting games…

In fact, my ability to express myself with so few words means my communication skills are off the charts, doesn't it? They're so amazing, in fact, that anyone who doesn't come talk to me must be a terrible communicator.

After leaving the station, as they chatted and looked at this and that, we arrived at the movie theater. The walk there, which wouldn't have taken even five minutes had I been alone, had taken up quite a bit of time.

But anyway, first there was the movie theater. We went in—I never had any choice as to what we were going to see—and the girls picked a movie. But fortunately, it was the same movie I'd missed seeing the other day, so this was the one thing I was sincerely happy about.

Hayama quickly went to go buy tickets for us. *Always sooo reliable!*

Maybe that was the sort of thing an unnecessary add-on like myself should have done, but I was ultimately just a side item. Depending on usage, side items are also called an “extra head” or a “pity case,” and they just simply exist. Please do not expect too much out of them.

They must have made sure to look up the time beforehand, as we didn’t have to wait around before we went into the theater.

The girls sat on either side of Hayama, while I ended up beside Orimoto. It had already been a priori that the girls would put Hayama in the middle, so this decision went smoothly. And as for the remaining issue of my own seat, this was an appropriate choice, if you considered that me and Orimoto were acquainted.

Once we were in our seats, the movie didn’t start right away. There was enthusiastic chattering at a slightly reduced volume here and there—well, directly to my right, actually.

I leaned my weight on the armrest to my left, making me naturally end up facing that way. This pose was just like a reverse Miroku Bodhisattva in the half-lotus position, otherwise known as the *Oh yeah, I’m listening, uh-huh* pose. If you sit like this, you project the impression that you’re participating, and it keeps people from getting worried about you, so they won’t force themselves to talk to you.

Eventually, the theater lights dimmed, and everyone stopped talking.

In the dim light, the movie thief began his wiggly dance. The appearance of this familiar character, who may be said to have become the face of the movie theater, drew smothered giggles from the audience.

As I was gazing at the screen, there was a *knock, knock* on the armrest on my right side. Glancing over, I saw Orimoto cup her hand around her mouth and whisper, “If my friends from middle school heard I’m watching a movie with you, Hikigaya, they’d freak out for real, huh?”

“Probably…”

“Right?” She nodded, smothering her giggles.

Indeed. I think those people from middle school would freak out.

Frankly, I was freaked out, too.

If middle school me had heard about this, he’d have probably freaked out, too. I wouldn’t have been happy about it at all. I’m

sure I would've cringed and made some nonsensical excuse to back out of it, like *It's nothing like that; it's not like I want to hang out or anything*. I'd never go. Seriously, the innocent logic of middle schoolers is such an enigma.

Well, it wasn't as if there had been any fundamental change here, either, but still, I was here. Maybe I'd grown a little.

At the very least, I didn't make out-of-place assumptions anymore. Now, even sitting beside her, even with her face this close in the dark, I didn't try to find meaning in it.

I leaned on the armrest on the left side, while Orimoto leaned on the one to the right.

There was something nostalgic about this sense of distance. Thinking back, I feel like it had been like this in middle school, too. Now it was nothing, and the two of us had never gotten closer, even once. This is just how Kaori Orimoto interacts with people she's not interested in, and that's all.

I got the feeling that, finally, I'd put a proper end to something that had never even really started.

X X X

When we left the movie theater, the night wind was cold on my cheeks. It seemed in that span of a little over two hours, it had suddenly gotten chillier out.

The movie itself had been, well, fairly decent. It had the highlights it needed to have, and I hadn't found myself particularly bored. I guess I'd call it Hollywood-ish.

I wasn't the only one with an opinion about the movie, and the others were currently chattering about it. It's like, you know, that's the reason movie theaters are often picked for dates, like they might tell you in *Hot-Dog Press*. You won't have problems thinking about what to talk about right after.

Every time Nakamachi said something like "That was great!" or "That was so fun!" Hayama smiled and nodded, and then Orimoto joined in.

"So like, wasn't that explosion intense? When it went off, Hikigaya was, like, acting so funny! It was hilarious! The way he was doing his creepy thing totally killed me!"

“Uh, it was just louder than I expected…” Having been smoothly inserted in the middle of this conversation, I gave a simple response. Ignoring them when my name was brought up would leave a bad impression, after all. And not getting in the way was the name of the game that day.

Hayama continued after me with “Yeah, it was a little startling.”

“But you seemed really chill, though,” Nakamachi said as she looked at Hayama, maintaining her position beside him.

Not one to lose, Orimoto also lined up beside Hayama, clapping her hands rather dramatically. “Oh, I thought so, too! I jumped a little, too, but you were totally normal, huh, Hayamaaa? But…hee—Hikigaya…was…li…!” Orimoto couldn’t restrain her laughter, and she shook all over. Her laughter spread to Nakamachi, too, and she glanced over at me and snickered.

O-okay… I—I hope my clown act was good for you…(eyes rolling back)

Anyway, even if I was being laughed it, it was fine as long as a mere side item wasn’t getting in the way.

Hayama smiled a little awkwardly as he watched the girls, but then he flicked a glance at the clock and urged us onward. “If we don’t hurry, we won’t have much time to look around.”

“Oh, that’s right. What time does it close again?” Orimoto asked me.

Of course there was no way I’d know. *I wasn’t even told which shop we were going to in the first place, so I don’t know, okay…? Why am I doing a mystery tour in my own hometown,* non*?*

Nakamachi thumbed her cell phone. It seemed she was looking it up. “Um, it says eight thirty.”

“No way! Yikes! We don’t have any time, huh?” Looking panicked, Orimoto pulled out her own phone and checked the time.

It’s about seven thirty in the evening now. About an hour, huh? I didn’t know how long it’d take for the girls to go shopping, but it must have been rather tight. Everyone automatically started walking faster.

Based on where Hayama was headed, it seemed he planned to head from here along Nanpa Street toward the PARCO. So then PARCO would be the sole option.

Man, Nanpa Street is a horrible name, huh? There’s also a bridge called Nanpa Bridge around Kaihin-Makuhari—what’s up

with Chiba?

We window-shopped around lots of places on the way before eventually arriving at a big intersection. In the big park on the opposite side, I could see young people dancing and skateboarding and stuff.

Now then, next on the schedule was shopping.

We went into the mall, and while we were going up the escalator, a conversation of "How about winter clothes?" or "How about a scarf with a uniform?" started—not including me.

Then we proceeded to the second floor. Up there were all sorts of shops that seemed perfect for high school girls to kill time: women's fashion, housewares, and miscellaneous. The housewares and miscellaneous stores had sofas and beds, so shoppers could bask in a bit of relaxation. Maybe there's some effect if the two of you sit on a sofa and scooch close or something, thinking in a *Hot-Dog Press* sort of way.

But for any other type of clothing or accessory places, I had no idea what to do. What's the correct way for a boy to spend his time here?

The last time I'd been out shopping, I'd felt embarrassed in that place where they'd been selling women's things, so now I found myself trying to remember. *What did I do then, again?*

I'd put on a foolish act, like a game of make-believe.

But it seemed there was no need for that today. Maybe it was because Hayama was with us, or because we were in a mixed group of four, but the staff didn't seem particularly suspicious of me.

If they had been choosing presents for other people, I would've had the space to interject, but since they were choosing things for themselves, I had nothing to opine about. Time passed as I stood there, diagonally behind Hayama.

"How about this, Hayama?"

"Oh, what about this?"

Orimoto and Nakamachi were starting a fashion show with Hayama. He seemed like he was busy dealing with them.

Meanwhile, I was completely at loose ends, so I amused myself by imagining I was bodyguarding a VIP, alert to my surroundings while I suddenly covered my ear and acted like I'd gotten a call on my earpiece as I searched for sniping points. That was when my security net caught someone for real.

It was a familiar-sounding voice. "So, like, trying them on is

nice and all, but you can't really tell when we're in our uniforms, y'know?"

"You're the one who said you wanted to look at boots, Yumiko…"

Carefully searching for the source of these voices, I spotted my classmates in a shop diagonally across from us. Yumiko Miura was standing in front of a mirror with a look of dissatisfaction, while Hina Ebina seemed exasperated.

"Maybe I *should* go with the black ones," Miura muttered, sort of like she was talking to herself, and then she took some boots that looked like black leather and put them on instead. Standing in front of the mirror again, she *hmm*'d pensively at herself.

But that seemed to be a hit for Ebina, who was watching, as she clapped her hands, all smiles. "Ohhh, that's nice. Black leather boots with a school uniform services some real niche tastes."

"…Never mind, then. And the next time you say something like that, I'll give you the boot, for real."

Give her the boot over boots, huh? Mm-hmm.

Looking openly annoyed, Miura pulled off the shoes. Her expression was quite disgruntled, but their exchange seemed to be in good fun.

Well, it was great that they were getting along. But it bothered me a little that Yuigahama wasn't there. I had this strong impression that the three of them would be together when they went shopping or were hanging out. Did Yuigahama have other plans or something?

"Wouldn't suede also be nice?" Ebina reached out to a different shelf, then slowly turned back to Miura. On her way around, her gaze met mine, as I'd been watching the whole time. "Oh."

This was probably the first time we'd looked straight at each other since the school field trip. There was a pause as we both read each other, figuring out how we should act.

Ebina's pause must have made Miura curious, as she craned her neck around, too. "What's up, Ebina?" And then she discovered me —or more accurately speaking, Hayama, who was beyond me. And what's more, that he was with other girls.

"H-Haya…" Miura shot up, mussing her loosely curled blonde hair. But she stumbled over her boots, which she was still in the process of removing, and her momentum sent her tumbling dramatically to the floor.

Panties! Pink! That's surprising!

That was a close one. For an instant, I wasn't regretting coming out here…

"H-hey, Yumiko, are you all right?!" Ebina rushed to Miura to help her up.

It looked like she was in pain, moaning with tears in her eyes. She was pressing a hand to her butt; she must have hit it when she fell. Noticing this, Ebina began kindly patting her.

What's with this picture?

"Nghhh, ugh, H-Haya…" Clearly still in pain, Miura looked over at Hayama with moist eyes.

Oh, that's gotta hurt. Both in body and soul.

But it's kind of nice to see a girl who's usually so confident with tears in her eyes!

It wasn't the time to be thinking these thoughts, though. With her in this state, it'd take time for her to reboot, but once she recovered, she'd come over to Hayama and quarrel with Orimoto and Nakamachi. Nobody would expect otherwise. If she were to whip out that intimidating aura she'd used on Isshiki before, that'd be trouble for me. It'd probably take forever to resolve, and I'd end up going home late.

I slipped around behind Hayama and kept my voice as low as possible. "Hayama, we should go somewhere else soon," I said.

"Huh?" He checked his watch.

Uh, it's not an issue of time. It's a little scarier.

But Hayama seemed to convince himself of something. "Guess that's right," he muttered before turning to the girls. "There's something I want to take a little look at, too."

At that, both girls returned the clothing and accessories they'd had to their original places.

"Sure. What do you wanna see?" Orimoto asked.

“Let’s just get going,” Hayama said, evading the question, and started walking off, leading the two.

Once we were some ways away from Miura and Ebina, it was Hayama’s shopping time.

By the way, it seemed there was no shopping time for me. Well, I didn’t particularly want anything right then, so it was fine. The only place I wanted to go was the bookstore, and I wanted to go there alone.

“I want to go take a look at the snowboarding gear,” Hayama said, heading for the up escalator. That stuff would be around the sports equipment shops on the sixth floor.

Then we heard loud voices on the down escalator.

“Irohaaasu. Listen, Murasaki Sports is the only place we need to go, okay?”

“No, no! Oh, wasn’t there a shop called Lion Sports near the west entrance?”

“No, Lion Sports is only baseball stuff. The name’s kinda misleading.”

I spotted a light-brown short bob and darker long hair. In their hands were bags from the sports equipment store we were headed to.

“Huh? Isn’t that Hayato?” Tobe, who came to the bottom first, noticed Hayama. Then he immediately wailed, “Hey, Hayatoooo!”

“What’s wrong, Tobe?” Hayama asked, a little confused at having Tobe suddenly come cling to him.

Tobe tugged at the hair at the back of his head with open discontent and began complaining. “Listen, man! Irohasu said she wants to get new jerseys, so we came to buy them, but we’ve been buying nothing but protein powder…,” he began, but then he must have finally seen me and the girls. At a loss as to what to say there, he took two steps backward. It seemed he’d assumed we were on a double date (lol). “Huh? …Uh, sorry, am I totally in the way? Sorry, sorry! We’ll get outta your hair. Right, Irohasu?” Tobe said, sounding flustered, and he turned around to Isshiki, but Isshiki wasn’t there.

Because she’d already circled around to my side.

She’s fast! Irohasu’s fast! Too scary!

“Hey, what’s going on? Oh, are you hanging out?” Her voice

was fluffy, her smile was broad, and her question was a perfectly normal thing to say when you bumped into another student in town. But there was a strange pressure in it. Somehow it seemed to also mean, *Wow, you've got guts to forget about my request and go hang out with girls*.

Uh, I really haven't forgotten, you know? And I am actually thinking about your request, in my own way…

"Uh, we're not really hanging out…" As I was wondering how I should explain this, Isshiki grasped my sleeve and looked up at me with puppy-dog eyes. *Oh hey, she's kind of cute—wait, hey, hold on, I can't!*

As she expressed her suspicion, she tug-tugged at my sleeve. I didn't expect her to tug so hard, and she pulled my shoulder down, tipping me forward a little until I was right at eye level with her. Her gentle, fluffy smile was right by my face. Softly, her quavering pink lips moved. "And hey, who's that girl? Oh, is she your girlfriend? Wait, there's two of them, isn't there? …What's going on here, huh?"

Scary… Terrifying.

How can such a cold voice come out of such a big smile…?

"Uh, well, like…"

As I was racking my brains trying to come up with an answer that would enable my escape, Hayama addressed Isshiki. "Sorry, Iroha. They're hanging out with me."

"Ohhh, is that right? Oh, I just happened to be out, too, so why don't we hang out together?" She immediately released my sleeve and spun around to face Hayama.

Wow, she's surprisingly aggressive about this.

Then Tobe, a little flustered, beckoned to Isshiki, like, *C'mon, c'mon*.

Phew, I've been freed…, I thought.

"Come on, Irohasu! Let's get going! Okay?"

"Guess you two were in the middle of shopping? Then we'll leave you to it, Tobe, Iroha." Hayama raised a casual hand.

Isshiki raised both her hands in front of her chest, waving cutely, like, *Yaaay!* "Okeydoke. See you later!" Then she waved at me, too. "Let's talk again later, 'kaaay?"

Agh, I haven't been freed after all. She's gonna make me explain myself the next time I see her, isn't she…?

But anyway, the next time I saw her would probably be the day

of the election. No—I should have one meeting with her before that.

The purpose of the election speech would be to make her lose the vote of confidence, so the worse it was, the better, but if it made Isshiki come off really badly, too, then it'd hurt her reputation. But still, if it went too well, then she might win the vote, no matter what incompetent trash the campaign speech was. It was a difficult balancing act.

But regardless, this was a one-shot game. I'd make sure to talk to her early the next week… *I wonder how I should explain today? Now I've got more crap to worry about*, I thought as I watched Isshiki and Tobe go.

As they walked away, Tobe was going, "Aw right!" and "Yeaaah!" and stuff, trying to build up a chipper mood to make Isshiki feel better. He's such a good guy. "Okay! Irohasu, let's go to Lion Sports! Yeah!"

"Oh, whatever. Aren't they just for baseball?"

"Huh?" Then came a rather pitiful sound.

"She's… Wow." My straightforward impression left my mouth as I watched them go.

Hearing that, Hayama smiled wryly. "Yeah, she's a bit of a handful for me, too."

"Oh-ho…"

Oh-ho? Are you bragging? Eh?

But his response was unexpected. "So Iroha will let you see her like that, too, huh?"

"What?" I asked back, not understanding what he meant.

Hayama's expression abruptly turned serious. "Iroha wants to look cute to a lot of people—not only me. I think she has this personal self-image she wants to maintain. She wants people to love her…so it's unusual for her to act natural."

That means she lets me see her true self because she doesn't want me to love her, though…

Tobe and Iroha went down the escalator, and once they were out of sight, Orimoto and her friend, who had been some distance away, approached. They must have been being considerate, or they'd figured it was a good idea to avoid Tobe when he was all worked up. Isshiki, too, with her oozing suspicion.

We went up to the sixth floor together and headed for the sports equipment store right by the top of the escalator.

“Were they your friends?” Nakamachi asked.

“Yeah, from the soccer club,” Hayama replied.

Orimoto very lazily joined in on the conversation. “I get it! I could tell!”

Is that right…? Looking at Tobe, *soccer jock* isn’t really the first phrase that comes to mind, though. Though I couldn’t tell you what other sports would suit him. Because I don’t care. But I doubt Orimoto was particularly interested in Tobe, either.

“And you just look like someone who’d play soccer, too, Hayama. Have you been doing it a long time?” It seemed this was the question she’d wanted to ask.

“Yeah. But I only started getting serious around middle school.”

Huh. That’s surprising. I’d figured he’d been in some junior league or something.

I didn’t say that out loud, but apparently, it showed on my face, as Hayama added with a wry smile, “I did lots of different activities when I was in elementary school, so I hadn’t narrowed it down to soccer.”

I see, I thought, and I found myself nodding. My reaction made it seem like I was more interested in Hayama than the girls. Oh, I didn’t really care. I was just that bored, so I’d wound up listening.

It was a little awkward, so I covered my discomfort by fiddling with the gear hanging on the racks and the grippers on the shelf placed diagonally away from them.

Thinking about it now, though, Hayama was a man of some mystery. This was partly because I’d never tried to find out anything about him, but also, he didn’t disclose things about himself. That was something about him that kind of reminded me of Yukinoshita. Maybe that’s the modesty of high society.

This made even someone like me, who wasn’t really interested, sort of listen to him. Of course, the two girls leaped on his remark. “Ohhh, but your middle school was good, right?”

“Wow. Our middle school clubs really sucked. Right?” Orimoto turned her head toward me, seeking agreement.

Deprecating your own environment in order to elevate the person you’re addressing is, well, the modesty of the middle class, I guess. I returned her nod.

Then Orimoto made an “Ah!” sound as if she’d just remembered something. “That reminds me: You weren’t in any clubs, Hikigaya, but didn’t you get an award for a sports test or something?”

“Yeah.” *Oh yeah, I guess I did…* But, like, sports tests are ultimately measured by other students, so you can get a record without even trying. With mine, the guy I’d been paired with had given so few shits, and for the more tiring ones like the twenty-meter shuttle run, he’d just picked some numbers and written them down. As a result, I’d gotten a grade-A ranking. But even if my partner hadn’t been like that, it’s not like the bar is that high. A bunch of other kids in the class got A rankings, too.

Of course, I’m sure Hayama did, too.

Picking up some gear, Hayama suddenly opened his mouth. “Don’t you get medals or something for that?” He pulled out a rather vague memory, and that threw open the door to more memories.

“Yeah, yeah! And then at the assembly at the end, when Hikigaya went up to the front to receive his, that really got everyone going!” Orimoto must have been remembering that time, as she started laughing. Nakamachi must have been imagining the scene, too, as she put her hand to her mouth and giggled a little.

Ah-ha-ha. Here comes a dry laugh from me, too.

This sort of thing is common when someone who’s normally inconspicuous suddenly draws attention to themselves in an unexpected situation. Ditto with reading aloud in Japanese or English class. The culture of public humiliation is the penchant of the lower class.

Having a little laugh must have satisfied them, as the girls started picking up various pieces of equipment that seemed to suit Hayama, offering comments like “Snowboarding is great” as they selected items.

As I watched from a couple of steps back, Hayama quietly approached my side. “…You had an unusual time in middle school.”

“Leave me alone.” It was nothing that unusual. I’m sure plenty of people have experienced something similar. In fact, if you were going to talk about uniqueness, then Hayama was much more so.

But it seemed that wasn’t what he was trying to say. He shrugged and continued. “That’s not what I mean… You said when you were in middle school, you liked her?” Hayama said, looking at Orimoto. “She your type? …That’s surprising.”

“Shut up…”

Hayama had a teasing smile on. He’s a sociable, smiley guy, but

I think this was the first I'd ever seen him amused like that.

But he didn't have to point any of this out to me. I was aware of it myself.

If I had to call it anything, I guess it'd be the folly of youth.

Looking back, it was still true that I'd believed I liked Kaori Orimoto, and it was also a fact that I'd confessed to her. But it wasn't as if there was anything special about her. "It's not like it was just Orimoto in particular. Not at all. I li… My type included quiet girls and more outgoing ones, too." Unsurprisingly, I was too embarrassed to actually say the word *like*. I hesitated, then covered it up.

"That's not a type." Hayama smiled wryly.

I was real sick of his fairly grown-up attitude. It felt like an emotion I had no way to express, something like irritation, would come out of me. I pushed it down and slowly assembled a response instead. "…And anyway, just because she was once doesn't mean she still is now."

"…That's true." Hayama nodded, as if that had convinced him. Our conversation ended there.

But he was still standing there beside me.

Neither of us talking, all I could hear was the store background music and the sound of the two girls chattering.

"In the end…" Hayama abruptly spoke again.

But it seemed hard for him to say, and he cut off there. I looked over at him, thinking he was going to continue, but he quietly looked away to somewhere else not inside the store. Somewhere farther away.

"In the end, I suppose you've never really come to like anyone."

His words clenched at my stomach. For an instant, I stopped breathing. I couldn't snap back at him, either. I couldn't even formulate anything of that nature. I had the sense that it was a bad idea to fall silent, so I opened my mouth a crack. But nothing came out.

Seeing I had nothing to say in reply, Hayama showed me a self-deprecating smile. "…And I haven't, either." He raised his head to the sky. In profile, he looked like a man ready to confess his sins.

"That's why we had the wrong idea." His quiet murmur melted into the air and dispersed.

"Hayamaaaa, what about this?" Orimoto's voice came from far away.

Hayama closed his eyes deeply just once and immediately opened them again, and there was his usual breezy smile. “What?” he said, ambling over toward the girls. He was holding himself like the Hayato Hayama I knew.

But the Hayato Hayama I didn’t know had worn an expression so sad, I’d almost expected him to cry.

X X X

While they were choosing gear, it came time for the store to close. There was one more push in my long task as side item. Once we went outside, it was completely dark out, and even colder.

Hayama checked a clock, then called out to the girls. “Hey, are you hungry?”

“Starved!” Orimoto replied instantly, and Hayama smiled wryly. Orimoto, who was a self-styled forthright personality, didn’t bother acting girlish, even in a situation like this. But this old man thinks that showing some shyness will win you a lot of points.

“So then what do you want to eat?” Hayama asked.

Nakamachi seemed to consider a moment but then said with reservation, “Anything’s fine.”

“What should we eat?” Orimoto spun around to look at me. She seemed to find something funny.

Well, if someone asks my opinion, I will reply. I wanted to go home as soon as possible, so it’d be best to get this over with someplace close by. Meaning I should choose a restaurant close to the mall exit. “Saize, I guess.” I’ve covered the positions of nearly all the Saizeriyas in Chiba, so I came to that conclusion immediately.

But when Nakamachi heard that, she gave me a dull look. “… Uh-huh.”

Hey, just a moment ago, you said you were fine with anything, didn’t you? Come on, what’s this about? You don’t like Saize? Or you don’t like me? In this case, never mind me—just apologize to Saize. Even if you come to hate me, please don’t hate Saizeriya!

Meanwhile, Orimoto was holding her stomach as she burst into laughter, saying, “Saize… He said Saize… Sa…i…ze…”

While I was thinking at this rate, we’d never reach a decision,

Hayama intervened. “Well, maybe not something that heavy, so how about that café?”

There was a café right across the street in the direction Hayama pointed. It looked chic and fashionable, so the girls nodded in agreement. Wait, it was because Hayama suggested it that they were convinced, wasn’t it…? If I’d pointed out that place, I couldn’t see this resolving peacefully. You know, it’s something like that law of popularity: You don’t get girls because you’re in a band; guys who get girls form bands.

Anyway, we crossed the crosswalk and went into the café.

It was moderately warm inside, and the lighting was a little dim, creating a nice atmosphere. Once we were all done making our orders, we went up to the second-floor seats.

Perhaps because it was later in the day, the dim café was fairly empty. There were a few people sitting at the table seats next to the stairs and one person at the counter by the window. The tables in the rear were open. With the number of people we had, we naturally ended up sitting over there.

From where I sat, I was facing the smoking section, which was divided from the rest of the café by glass. There was a woman sitting there with her hat pulled down over her eyes and earbuds in her ears, but she wasn’t smoking a cigarette, nor did she have an ashtray near her.

She really did follow us…

Haruno Yukinoshita gave me a stealthy wave so that only I would notice.

Well, it doesn’t look like she’s planning to get in the way, so there’s no real harm if I leave her alone, I guess… It’s not as if she’s done anything to me in particular before. Besides, Hayama would have noticed her, too. But if he wasn’t saying anything, that had to mean he planned to ignore her.

Meanwhile, it seemed the girls never noticed Haruno was there at all. Well, that was a normal assumption. They must not have imagined this university-aged big sister would bother coming to observe her “little brothers’” date. Neither had I, for that matter.

But more than that, most of all, they were absorbed in their chat with the boy in front of them, and they had no eyes for anything else. Oh, and before you ask, yes. That *anything else* does include me.

The warm drinks seemed to make the girls talkative. I listened

in silence as they chatted for a while. I didn't forget to make listening noises, more or less, as I blew on my coffee to cool it.

As I was raising my head from my drink, figuring it might have finally reached an acceptable temperature, that was right when the conversation reached a break.

Orimoto looked over at me like she didn't know what to talk about. *Huh? What, I have to say something?* I worried momentarily, but that concern was needless.

"Ah-ha!" she laughed. She was clearly having a great time here. "But Saize, though, come on!"

"Yeah, it's kind of weird." Nakamachi giggled in the same way.

…Uh-huh. So sorry, who were you again? Something-machi?

Due to what had happened in middle school, me being the butt of jokes like this was, well, I could get it. In fact, Orimoto's actions were perfectly valid. But I dunno about her friend saying stuff like that about me…

Look down on someone once, and then you can say whatever you want. At some point, she'd realized I was the kind of character you could tease however you wanted, and she'd taken that as a green light.

Orimoto, or rather middle school me, had laid the groundwork to make things like this, so I couldn't avoid it. I would accept my fate. Oh, coffee and life are truly bitter.

With a masculine, astringent, civil smile on my face, my lips twitched.

Hayama, sitting beside me, put down his cup with a clack. "I don't really like this…"

"Yeah, right?" Nakamachi commented agreeably. Toward what, I don't even know.

"No, that's not what I mean." Hayama smiled.

His voice bright as the sun and his tone sweeter than chocolate, as if he was kindly admonishing her for a misunderstanding, he said, "What I'm talking about is you two."

"U-um…" Orimoto and Nakamachi both made confused sounds, as if they didn't understand what they'd just heard. I couldn't pin down where he was going with this, either.

Nobody said anything, and I felt like the store background music suddenly got louder.

The tap of a footstep rang out in the silence. There were some people coming up the stairs, slowly approaching us.

"…You're here," Hayama muttered, standing up.

Then he raised his hand, and I followed his gaze to Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. They were in their uniforms and with their bags, looking like they were on their way back from school.

These entirely unexpected visitors made me stand up without thinking, too. "Guys…"

"Hikki…" Yuigahama smiled a little sadly, standing there and looking at loose ends. She was squeezing the strap of her backpack tight. Behind her, Yukinoshita just looked at us imperiously. Her cold eyes showed no emotion, and even when our gazes clashed, that didn't change.

This was torture, and I couldn't help but turn my head away. "Why are you here…?" I murmured.

Hayama answered, "I invited them."

The three of us with him reacted with wide-eyed shock. From where those two girls sat, they must have had no idea what he meant. Not only had Hayama spoken harshly to them, now some strangers had shown up, and what's more, Hayama had been the one to invite them.

As we were frozen and a little confused, Hayama turned back to Orimoto and her friend and continued. "Hikigaya is more than who you think he is." The smile was gone from his face now. I could hear distinct hostility in his voice. Under Hayama's sharp glare, Orimoto and Nakamachi froze. "He's friends with girls who are way better than you. You only see the surface and say whatever you want. Could you not?" He was indicating toward Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

Orimoto and Nakamachi looked over there, too. And then they breathed little groan-like sighs. They were speechless—probably out of disillusionment, or fear, or simultaneous confusion with this person, Hayato Hayama.

A silence fell; no one knew how to respond.

But then, just one person there…

Was it my imagination, or did I detect someone giggling behind the counter in the smoking section?

Eventually, Orimoto sighed deeply. "Sorry. I'll go, then," she said, grabbing her bag.

Nakamachi hurriedly followed her. "Y-yeah, sorry. Me too…" The two of them stood and headed for the stairs that went down to the first floor.

On the way, they passed by Yukinoshita and Yuigahama, and there, Orimoto froze for a moment. She glanced at the two of them.

Yukinoshita didn't even seem to notice Orimoto, her eyes never leaving me and Hayama, while Yuigahama must have felt weird about being stared at, as she awkwardly twisted around and averted her eyes a little.

"…I see," Orimoto muttered, as if she'd figured something out, then started walking again.

As Nakamachi went down the stairs, she turned back to us once, worried about Hayama. But nevertheless, she immediately turned away again, avoiding making any sound as she quietly descended the steps.

Once Orimoto and Nakamachi were out of sight, Yukinoshita breathed a little sigh and then slowly began. "You told me we were meeting to discuss the election," she said sharply, with a glare at Hayama. The flash in her eyes was a more eloquent attack on Hayama than anything she could have said. Hayama was at a loss for a reply and looked away.

"You mean the student council election?" I asked. Yukinoshita refused to respond to my question, while Hayama weakly nodded.

But Yuigahama fumblingly attempted to mediate. "U-um, me and Yukinon were talking about how maybe Hayato could run in the election, and he said we should talk a little today, and then, and then…" She sputtered off at high speed, and at the end, her sentences fell apart.

So they'd brought up Hayama as a candidate after all. That selection in itself was no surprise. I could call it a reasonable choice. But it was baffling that Hayama had accepted. Even if he could never refuse a request, he had his club, and he was the captain, too. If he didn't give both his all, he would cause trouble on both sides. He should understand that much. So he wouldn't accept it.

Not understanding what he was really after, I looked at him. Under my gaze, Hayama replied in a listless mutter, "I just figured I would do what I can."

I wasn't the one to react to that.

"Hmmm, I see." The woman who'd been sitting in a corner of the smoking section the whole time stood up, took off her hat, and stepped up before us.

"Haruno…" With her sister right there in front of her,

Yukinoshita let a little of her agitation show. I doubt she ever expected to run into Haruno here.

Seeing her reaction, Haruno smiled nastily. “So you’re not going to be student council president, Yukino-chan? I thought for sure you would.” She took one step closer to Yukinoshita, then another, coming to stand in front of her. Yukinoshita bit her lip and lowered her gaze. But even if she averted her eyes, she couldn’t plug her ears, too.

Haruno continued. “You’re just like Mom, making others do everything for you.”

Yukinoshita didn’t say anything in reply to that remark as she tightly clenched her fists.

Haruno leaned close to Yukinoshita and gently stroked her neck. “Well, maybe you’re fine with that. You don’t have to do anything. Someone else will always swoop in to take care of it, huh?” Her long and elegant fingers trailed along the fine white line of Yukinoshita’s neck—slowly, as if she would slice open her artery or strangle her.

When Haruno’s hand reached the base of her throat, Yukinoshita knocked it away.

The two of them continued to face each other for a few seconds. No one could have come between them during that time.

“Yes. That’s right…,” Yukinoshita muttered, and she glared at Haruno, then at Hayama. Hayama breathed a deep sigh and closed his eyes, and Haruno smiled boldly.

Yukinoshita adjusted her bag over her shoulder and turned around. “If you don’t need anything else, then I’m going…,” she told us over her shoulder. Then she started walking off.

The frozen moment was gently set in motion once more. When we all finally exhaled again, Yuigahama snapped out of her daze with a gasp and went after Yukinoshita. “W-wait, Yukinon!”

Once her hurried footsteps down the stairs faded away, only me, Hayama, and Haruno remained.

“Why’d you have to say all that to her?” I asked.

Haruno erased the cruel smile she’d worn until then and breathed a tiny sigh. “You don’t have to ask, do you? It’s the same reason as always.”

“You’re putting in a lot of effort just to meddle.” Haruno had interfered with Yukinoshita’s business before. But there was clearly a line between that and what she’d done today. Before, her

aggression had been too tepid to call open provocation. I was asking out of curiosity.

But Haruno tilted her head cutely and played stupid. “Am I?”

Even if you’re siblings—no, *because* you’re siblings, you will run into conflict. That’s particularly true with these especially talented sisters, who have been compared with each other all their lives. So it was obvious Yukinoshita would have some negativity toward Haruno. Of course, the elder sister, Haruno, was also being measured against Yukino. So then it wouldn’t be strange for her to harbor some of the same feelings, too.

“Yeah, well, I have a little sister, too, so I can kinda tell when there’s something going on between siblings.” That was why I could say this with confidence.

But upon hearing that, Haruno smiled. This one was a completely different sort of smile from the one she’d shown me in the donut shop a while ago. There was not even a shadow of that peaceful expression here now. “You understand everything, don’t you, Hikigaya?” The ironic edge to her words seemed to mock my shallowness. And it was sharp, too, rejecting the intrusion of an outsider.

The pressure oozing from behind that smile gave me goose bumps.

“…”

As I tensed up, Haruno narrowed her eyes. Her gaze was different now, softer. Her tone of voice brightened, too. “Don’t give me that scared look. I really am impressed with you.”

“Thanks…,” I replied, rubbing through my clothing at the goose bumps that wouldn’t settle.

Haruno’s gaze as she watched my gestures was surprisingly soft. “You’re interesting. You’re always trying to read into what people say and do. I love it.”

Her words were a surprise attack, and I choked up with an *ngh*.

Smiling, Haruno added, “It’s like you’re afraid I have bad intentions. It’s cute.” Her expression was sadistic, with not even a speck of anything romantic. It was exactly like she was regarding a pet. And then that gaze slid over to the person next to me. “There’s nothing interesting about someone who can handle everything flawlessly, now, is there?”

Hayama, who’d been silently listening to the conversation until then, sighed in lieu of clearing his throat. I understood without

asking who she was talking about.

When neither I nor Hayama was able to reply, Haruno gave a little shrug, then grabbed her bag, which she had left on her seat. “All right, I know what I wanted to know, so I guess I’ll get going, too. This has kinda gotten boring anyway.” After that parting shot, without looking back, she trotted down the stairs. The all-too-vibrant moment of her departure was very befitting of the free-spirited person she was, and it felt as if no one could stop her.

It felt like just a hint of the perfume she’d worn remained.

Now it was me and Hayama.

This all had been so pointless. I just wanted it over with, so I reached out for my bag, too.

But there was one thing.

Even as I tried not to, I had to say it. “…Don’t get any ideas. That was unnecessary.”

I don’t think I was angry at what Hayama had done in and of itself. What I hadn’t liked was that Yukinoshita and Yuigahama had seen me with Orimoto and her friend.

The fact that no one had to tell me that made me even more angry.

Hayama gave a weak, self-deprecating laugh, and his shoulders drooped. It made him look small, even though he was supposed to be taller than me. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t my intention… I just did what I wanted to do.”

“What you said to those two girls…was that just what you wanted, too?”

I would never have imagined a cruel smile like that from Hayama normally—in fact, it had been what I’d expect from Haruno Yukinoshita. Despite its brightness and prettiness, it had been entirely skin-deep. I understood he’d done that in my defense. But even so, I couldn’t understand why he’d do something like that, why he’d be willing to destroy the image he’d cultivated.

“…It didn’t bother you at all?”

“…I feel awful. I never want to do it again,” Hayama spit, and he bit his lip.

“Then you shouldn’t have done it.” I was utterly disgusted. I don’t understand the ideas good people come up with. They want everyone to get along, so when things come apart at the seams, they try to fix it, but then that opens holes elsewhere. I never even asked to be a part of this.

Hayama sat down in his chair with a thump. Then with his gaze, he prompted me to take a seat. I refused, staying on my feet as I waited for him to speak.

He breathed a resigned sigh and leaned forward a bit, lacing his fingers together. "…I've been thinking for a while…about how to get back what I've broken."

"What?" I didn't understand what he was stabbing at. But it was clear to me that his ambiguous manner of speaking meant that it was something he wanted to avoid talking about, and that lead me to infer what it was.

"I…kinda hoped you could help, so even though I knew what would happen, I relied on you. And because of that…"

"Hey."

Don't say any more.

My tone of voice was rougher than usual. I wasn't going to touch on that again. It was already over and done with, and what Hayama had been about to say was like grave robbing.

Hayama must have wanted to avoid touching on it himself, as he cut off there and went straight to his conclusion. "You should know what you're really worth…and not just you. The people around you should, too."

"What are you talking ab… Huh?" I was so surprised by his remark, all I could come out with was that disjointed reply.

"But that's hard… I wish I could have done better… This was about all I could do," Hayama said in a somewhat self-deprecating manner with a twist of his lips. But when his smile dropped, the look he gave me was terribly sad. "…You've always done things like this, haven't you? But could you stop…always sacrificing yourself to make things work?"

"…I'm not you." The thing tangled in my throat came out all at once. My voice echoed quietly through the café, and I realized there was irritation, anger, and a tinge of sadness in it.

Argh, I really am on edge. My feelings are all mixed up.

I'd pushed them this far; they'd come so close. So why do they go off somewhere else?

I think I really had gotten my hopes up, thinking maybe Hayama understood.

But he didn't.

Don't look down on me with your sympathy. Don't pity me.

Hayama had the wrong idea. I'd given him a hand because I'd

felt sorry for him. There was no reason for him to feel sorry for me.

A lump of feelings I could not define left my mouth before I could stop it. “Sacrificing myself? Bullshit. To me, it’s just what I do.”

When I snapped back at him, Hayama listened in silence. It was like he was just letting himself be punched, and that pissed me off further.

“Because I’m always alone. When there’s something that needs to be resolved, I’m the only one who can do it. So obviously, I do it.” There is no one but me in my world. With the events that I face, there has always only ever been me. “So it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks. If something happens in front of me, it’s my business, and never anyone else’s. Don’t stick your nose in because you don’t see what’s actually going on.”

The world is my subjective view.

If I make a choice and fail, that’s fine. But if those results are snatched away by someone else, that’s something else entirely.

That’s a usurper pretending to be a savior.

Hayama glared back at me.

His fists had clenched at some point, probably without even him noticing. Then he suddenly relaxed them and weakly lowered his gaze. “When you… When you help people, isn’t it because you wish someone would help you?”

That settled it.

He didn’t understand a damn thing.

He was basically saying that all my help, all this time, had been done out of self-interest.

Even if Hachiman Hikigaya was like that—

—I couldn’t let Hayama say anyone else was.

I hadn’t come to this point based on phony feelings, and neither had she.

“No.”

I even stopped glaring at him.

I don’t want that sort of tepid kindness or sympathy. That cliché, tear-jerking teen drama is so disgusting, it makes me want to puke.

In this teen drama, there always exists a loser, and that’s unavoidable. So then there exists a possibility I may at some time be the victor. There may also be a time when the boy in front of me would become the loser.

That's the zero-sum game we're in. One person's pleasure is another's pain. It's nothing more than that. You might sing the praises of youth, but one mistake can turn it all upside down.

You're just feeling nice for a while, so stop treating it like it means you're above me. Don't pity me and don't give me your sympathy. That's just comfortable complacency.

I snatched up the bag I'd left there.

"Keep your sympathy; it makes me sick. Don't label me as a charity case. It's a pain in the ass," I spit, then turned around and went down the stairs.

As I left the café, I moved my legs way faster than usual, never stopping until I was close to the station. Though it wasn't like anyone was following me, I kept taking one step after another.

When I reached the bicycle parking where I'd left my bike, I finally stopped.

I looked up at the sky to see the stars shining.

A bunch of the bikes had fallen—the wind must have knocked them over. My bicycle was at the very bottom of the pile.

As I was lifting each one, a word came to my lips. "…Bullshit."

To whom was that word directed?

I wouldn't let him call it self-sacrifice.

I've maximized efficiency and done the very best I can with the few cards I've drawn—he doesn't get to call that a sacrifice. That was a humiliation greater than anything. A blasphemy against someone who's lived in desperation.

Who'd sacrifice themselves for you jerks?

Even if I hadn't put those feelings into form, even if I hadn't voiced them out loud, even if they had never become words…

…I'd had a firm conviction.

I think it was the one thing I shared with a certain someone.

And now I'd lost it.

6

And so **Yui Yuigahama** declares.

It's not unusual for me to spend my weekends in a state of ennui, but still, these past two days had been particularly bad.

I slept like the dead, then in the afternoon, I'd wake up and eat, then go lie around on the couch, until eventually, sleepiness took over and I nodded off for a nap, and then by the time I woke up again, it'd already be evening. Then I'd eat dinner and lounge around until I got tired again and eventually fell asleep. Repeat this for two days, and my weekend was over.

The whole time, I had this feeling like there was powdered medicine in my mouth. That bitter, gritty, unpleasant feeling never went away. That didn't change, even once Monday came around. In fact, my despondency only increased.

As I cycled to school under the cloudy sky, the wind was cold, and my pedals were heavy. Once I was at school, now it was my feet that were heavy, and the draft blowing in from somewhere really got to me.

But the people in the classroom made it feel warmer.

It still felt somewhat darker than usual, and probably not only because of the weather. Though it was all the same faces in the same places, it didn't feel lively enough.

The main cause of this was probably that the central figure of the class was depressed. The voices I heard from the rear of the class were lower in volume than usual, too.

Even Tobe, who was usually extra loud, was keeping to a moderate volume. Maybe that was his way of being thoughtful. "Hayato, what about club today?"

"Yeah. I guess I'll go a little early." Hayama's tone was the same

as always. He was just speaking less than usual, and that seemed to naturally infect the others.

"That reminds me, there's no practice on Friday, huh?" Ooka said nonchalantly, and Yamato responded with an "Ohhh, yeah." The sports clubs all shared the same field. The both of them were aware of that.

Something about that must have struck Miura, as she replied with that one word. "…Friday." Her mind seemed elsewhere, somehow, like she was murmuring the word in a feverish delirium.

With a sudden realization, Ebina stood up, pushing her chair back with a scrape. "Y-Yumiko! Friday and today—I don't know which is topping!"

"Friday…" This time, Yuigahama was the one to mutter the word.

"O-okay! Your vote is for Friday as the top, huh? What about you, Tobecchi?!"

The conversation suddenly turned toward him, Tobe was at a loss. "Huh? Uh, what does Friday have to do…?" But he seemed to have a thought then, as he suddenly started raising his voice, knocking over his chair to stand. "I-it's today, of course! Today just keeps going up and up! It's gotta be today!"

"R-right? I—I think so, too!"

Dragging in Ooka and Yamato, too, Tobe and Ebina high-fived.

"Woo!"

"Yay!"

Once they were basically done with their shenanigans, the both of them were panting. But Hayama smiled kindly, while Miura and Yuigahama merely sighed.

…It was a tear-jerking effort.

But I'd be bothered if they didn't do that.

Because that was the sort of relationship they would want.

X X X

Time quietly passed along through first and second period. Third period also went by without great event, and then it was fourth.

Once this was over, it'd be lunchtime. The mood in the class would probably be the same as it had that morning. I don't eat in

the classroom, so it didn't have much to do with me, but how would it look to the other classes when the person who had been one of the most lively in the school was this dispirited?

Maybe they wouldn't actually notice. None of our teachers seemed to have noticed.

Fourth period was Japanese. The bell rang, and Miss Hiratsuka walked in. She looked around the room, tilting her head. "…Hmm. You're all quiet today. Oh well, let's get started."

As expected, she was watching closely.

She instructed us to turn to a certain page in our textbooks before she read out something, then started writing on the chalkboard.

Propping my head on my hand, I opened up my textbook. I mechanically rotated my gaze between the book, the blackboard, and my notebook. But no matter which I was looking at, the rows of characters produced no meaning. Class went on by without anything entering my head at all.

It had been like this all day.

I'd been going round in circles, repeating questions for which no answers emerged.

I'd suddenly remember something, then my thoughts would drift again.

What did Orimoto think when she saw Yukinoshita and Yuigahama?

Maybe that was unfair to Nakamachi.

Is Isshiki going to come talk to me? And I have to do something about her election, too.

Oh, and on that note, I guess I have to give a progress report to Meguri, too.

Ebina can handle supporting Miura, and Tobe could help out with that, too. This might actually lead to things going well for them.

Should I have bought Komachi a chocolate croissant yesterday? She still isn't talking to me.

And what is Haruno thinking? I don't really understand her and Yukinoshita's relationship. I've never gotten even a little closer to them.

Hayama's more listless than usual. I'm impressed he can put on a smile anyway. Is he not affected by that stuff? If so, then that's just great. *If I'm the only one going around in circles here, then my own excessive self-consciousness is gonna make me sick.*

Most of all, what are the two of them thinking right now?

At some point, my hand had stopped copying the text on the board.

Realizing that, I jerked my head up, and my eyes met with Miss Hiratsuka's at the teacher's podium.

"Hikigaya."

"Y-yes?" My name suddenly being called made me react with a twitch.

Miss Hiratsuka sighed deeply. "Come to the staff room after class," she said. Nothing more. Then she descended from the teacher's podium and left the classroom.

What about class…? I thought, and I looked around to see everyone already putting away their textbooks, notebooks, and stuff, pulling out their lunches, and moving their desks. It seemed while I'd been zoning out, the bell had rung.

I put away my books and other supplies, too, and stood from my seat.

Come to the staff room after class meant I was to come during lunch hour. I'd get this done before I had lunch. If I didn't, I'd lose my time to eat.

I hurried out into the hallway to find Miss Hiratsuka walking a little ahead. I followed her to the teachers' room. Though I was close enough that I'd be able to hear her, she didn't say anything. She silently communicated to me to follow.

Once we were in the staff room, she finally opened her mouth. "Let's use the back." By *the back*, she must have meant the reception space set up in the staff room. Behind a partition, there was a glass-topped coffee table and black leather-upholstered sofas. She'd brought me there before. "Sit." She indicated the sofa, and I sat there.

She sat down on the sofa on the other side, a little to the right diagonally in front of me. Then she pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

I gently pushed the crystal ashtray on the table to her side, and she nodded and hummed.

She took two or three drags, then tapped off the ash. "You weren't listening at all in class today," she said with a mildly irritated look. "Your exam scores are the one thing you've got going for you, so this is a problem." She blew out a full, disapproving breath of tobacco smoke, paused a moment, then got to the point. "…Yukinoshita came to talk to me this morning."

Since Miss Hiratsuka had gone to the trouble of calling me here,

this had to be fairly important. I sat up straighter and listened closely.

She tapped the ash off her cigarette again. “To talk about running in the election for student council president.”

“Who’s running?” I asked.

“She is,” Miss Hiratsuka replied instantly.

Hearing that created a flutter of unease in my heart.

Yukinoshita was running in the election for student council president.

The question of *why* bubbled up. She didn’t really like standing in front of a crowd; she’d said so herself. When the role of chair of the cultural festival had been pushed on her, she’d stubbornly refused. Most of all, there was the Service Club.

Had Haruno’s provocation roused her to action? Was the discord between the two sisters still stubbornly burning its hot embers, even now?

As I lost myself in thought, Miss Hiratsuka added, “And Hayama will be doing her campaign speech.”

“Oh…” *Hayama, huh…?*

It was true that if she was going to get anyone to do her campaign speech, he was the best choice—but only if there were no ties of obligation there. I don’t know what’s gone on between Hayama and Yukinoshita in the past; I’ve never known. However, based on the way they normally interacted, this felt out of character, especially considering the principles that motivated her behavior.

Had Yukinoshita decided over the weekend that she’d run, contacted Hayama, and gotten him to promise to do her campaign speech? Her motives and intentions were unclear to me, but as always, she was good at making things happen. That was the one thing I could say was like her.

Miss Hiratsuka crushed her cigarette in the tray and raised her face. “What will you do, Hikigaya?”

“I won’t do anything. I can’t nitpick her methods, can I?” Besides, it was common sense that Yukinoshita becoming student council president would resolve things in the smoothest manner. So there was no need to search out another candidate to back, either. I couldn’t find any problems or faults anywhere.

Even more troubling was that I could easily imagine her as student council president.

Without realizing it, I'd been grinding my teeth this whole time.

"…Well, if we're talking about if she has what it takes, she fits the role," I muttered. In fact, why hadn't I thought of that possibility in the first place? I'd unconsciously excluded it as an option.

Even though I'd known that place, that time together, could fall apart easily at any moment, due to any factor.

Miss Hiratsuka nodded. "Mm-hmm, yes…she's the most qualified person we could get. If others knew, teachers included, she'd be very much welcomed."

Indeed. That would probably relieve not only the teachers, but Meguri, too. If she found out, they wouldn't even have to have an election. That would essentially settle the whole situation.

When I started thinking about it, I suddenly realized something. “She hasn’t told anyone yet?”

“No, she hasn’t.” Miss Hiratsuka smiled sweetly, then lit another cigarette. She huffed out another vigorous breath and pointed her fingertip at me. “Now then, I’ll ask one more time. What will you do, Hikigaya?” she asked.

Before I could even think, I had a knee-jerk reaction.

I couldn’t accept Yukinoshita’s bid for student council president.

Whatever arguments I came up with, they’d all be excuses for my initial reaction. But I’d get my reasons soon enough. I understood her plan was the wrong way to go about things. Ultimately, if she was going to take this on, it would be no different from what had happened with the cultural festival.

I’d already rejected those methods.

Then I could take that conclusion to hold true this time, too.

“…Miss Hiratsuka, do you have the key to the clubroom?” I asked.

She fluttered her hand. “Yukinoshita uses it at lunchtime, as always.”

That meant around this time, she’d still be in the clubroom, eating her lunch.

Once she’d announced her candidacy in this election, she wouldn’t be able to withdraw. Whether I was going to stop her or not, if I was going to talk to her, then sooner was better.

When I stood up, Miss Hiratsuka looked out the window and puffed out a breath of smoke. “Even now that attendance is optional, she comes to get the key every day.”

“…Is that right? Excuse me, then.” I bowed, and Miss Hiratsuka raised her hand in return without looking at me. Cigarette smoke continued to waft above her.

I quickly left the staff room and headed straight for the clubroom.

The stairs and hallway of the special-use building were sparsely populated with passing figures. It made for a terribly bleak scene. But walking quickly kept the cold from bothering me.

I put my hand on the door of the clubroom and immediately opened it.

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were there. Both of them had little boxed lunches spread out. My sudden entrance made Yuigahama stare at me, openmouthed. But Yukinoshita just eyed me coolly in the same manner as the other day, saying nothing.

"Yukinoshita, are you going to run?" I asked.

She answered me concisely. "…Yes." Then she quietly looked down.

"Huh?" Yuigahama was the only one surprised here, her eyes wide.

"You didn't know?" I asked.

"N-no…," Yuigahama said, her gaze sliding downward as she drew in her shoulders.

Yukinoshita gave Yuigahama an apologetic look. "…I was just about to consult with you about it," she said, but she was looking away from the other girl.

"It's not consulting if you've already decided," I said.

Yukinoshita had made this decision on her own, and she'd taken first steps on her own. It probably was true that she'd meant to talk about it now. Or maybe she'd meant to talk about it earlier. Setting aside the question of whether she'd actually managed to bring it up.

The events of a few days ago crossed my mind, and I asked, "Is it because of…what your sister said?"

But without looking at me, Yukinoshita answered. "This has nothing to do with her. I don't take the things she says seriously. This is what I want."

I didn't know what was actually true. I didn't understand either of the Yukinoshita sisters enough to be able to touch on their relationship. But even if I did address that matter, I highly doubted that would change Yukinoshita's answer to me.

It would be best to talk about something else.

"Weren't you going to back Hayama?"

"He has his club, and there's no one else suitable for the job," Yukinoshita answered, eyes on her own hands laid on top of the desk.

Hearing that, Yuigahama timidly said, "But you have a club, too, Yukinon…"

Yukinoshita looked up to smile at her and acknowledge her fumbling, hesitant attempt. "I'll be all right. This club isn't as much work as the soccer team, and I'm aware of how the student council

works, so I don't think it will be a great burden for me."

So she said, but would it really work out so well?

Had anyone ever been on the student council while also being in a club? With Yukinoshita's abilities, maybe she could pull that off. But when I thought about the cultural and athletic festivals, I felt there were too many unknowns until she actually tried them.

I understood that she couldn't back Hayama. The soccer club was a core athletic club. Being their captain, he wouldn't be able to get out of practice that easily. That clearly meant he couldn't participate in student council activities. That was why I'd excluded him as a candidate from the start, too.

But that didn't immediately mean that Yukinoshita should run. "What about the possibility of backing a candidate other than Hayama?" I suggested.

"You were the one who rejected that idea," Yukinoshita answered instantly and icily.

Indeed, considering the time restrictions, it was unlikely we could select and convince someone with the attributes of a student council president and also make sure they won the election. I was the one who had pointed that out.

My mind does its best work only when criticizing other people. But I'd never thought that tendency would stand in my way at a time like this. I found myself scratching my head. "That's why you're gonna run?" The remark came out so short, it ended up sounding rather curt. Yuigahama's shoulders twitched.

But Yukinoshita calmly—no, in a manner even more glacial than usual, delivered her reply. "Objectively speaking, I believe it's best for me to do it. And I can easily beat Isshiki. Doing things myself, I won't have to adjust to working with someone else. I'm sure the other members of the student council will be motivated, so unlike the previous functions, I should be able to move things along smoothly and efficiently… And besides, I don't mind doing it," she finished saying all at once, then breathed a little sigh.

Her face was tilted downward as if she intended to end this conversation, and it seemed to reveal sadness, also a hint of grim determination.

Efficiently*, huh?*

That word in particular stuck with me. She wasn't the only one who had sought efficiency. I could think of someone else who had acted based on that rationale.

That was exactly why, if we were talking about efficiency only, there was another way. “Sure, maybe, but you could also not play in the first place,” I said.

Yukinoshita raised her face from its sagging position. “Are you talking about your plan?” she asked me, a sharp glint in her eye. That look again.

But I wasn’t going to back down now. So I looked her in the eye, too. “Yeah.”

I didn’t have absolute confidence in my plan. But even so, of the cards that had been dealt to me, I intended to draw those that had the greatest chances of success and greatest efficiency.

I’d already shown my hand.

Yukinoshita sighed, gaze leaving me for a moment.

And then she fixed me with a glare. I felt the pressure of an emotion close to hostility. “It’s arrogant of you to believe that all the students in the school will act based on what you do or say. I don’t think it’s enough to resolve this.”

She hit me where it hurt.

As Yukinoshita said, I didn’t have that kind of influence. I was well aware of that. I had been able to stir things up within the small community of a committee. But being someone with no reputation or popularity, someone even lesser than your regular student who would never rise in the world, it was frankly an unknown quantity just how much effect my words would have on an unspecified majority. Even if people hated me, they might not even remember me. It was uncertain I would be fixed in the memory of the student body. And they might also consider me as a separate entity from Isshiki.

But in that case, I simply had to once again carefully examine what needed to happen for our predicted results and then go above and beyond it.

“So then I’ll come up with a plan assuming they won’t.” If being unfair and vicious wasn’t enough, then I’d just have to use malice and spite. There were any number of ways to rake together hatred and loathing. People don’t need reasons to hate others. *They kinda annoy me*, *They’re kinda nasty*, or *They’re kinda gross* can all become reasons to hate people.

My lips twisted in a sneaky smile. My expression did that on its own; I wasn’t doing it intentionally. I looked back at Yukinoshita.

Seeing that, Yukinoshita firmly bit her lip and looked away

from me. “…If you think everyone is thinking about you…that they hate you, then you are incredibly self-absorbed.”

That one remark hurt way more than any logic.

The monster of self-consciousness hiding away in its labyrinth crawled even deeper in.

I hadn’t been able to counter a single thing Yukinoshita had said.

When the conversation cut off there, in the silence, the wind rattled the window. The north wind blowing through chilled the clubroom.

“…You and I do things differently.” She was facing the floor, her tightly clenched fists and narrow shoulders trembling in the cold. That was all she said. But it was the one thing I could agree with.

“Yeah…” We really did. I don’t think it was about what was proper and improper, like about the pros and cons of a given method—we had different goals. That disparity was the distance between us now.

Yuigahama, sitting between us, was listening silently. She must have been in thought the whole time. As if her mind was elsewhere, she muttered, “Oh…so that’s what you’re gonna do, Yukinon…”

Nobody else said anything.

As I felt time gradually freezing over, Yukinoshita glanced at me. “Is there anything else?”

“…No, I just wanted to confirm that.”

I don’t know exactly what I wanted to confirm. This situation was different from the last time I’d rejected Yukinoshita’s methodology, so I couldn’t stand opposed to her methods so easily. I didn’t think hers was the best way, but I was gradually coming to accept it.

“…Mm-hmm.” Yukinoshita breathed a sound somewhere between a reply and a sigh, then began packing away her little lunch box. I could see there was still quite a lot of food left in it.

I turned around and left the clubroom.

I knew the sound of me closing the door behind me would be loud in the silent room.

I walked down the hallway of the special-use building far slower than when I’d come.

That was when Hayama came toward me from ahead. When he noticed me, he casually raised a hand. “So you came, too?”

I was impressed he could bring himself to talk to me. He speaks his mind to me, and then he's suddenly acting like he's fine. I really couldn't understand how he didn't feel anything about this. Or was he like Haruno in disposition, too?

"…" I didn't really feel like talking at all, so I asked with my gaze why he was there.

He shrugged. "They wanted to see me."

"Oh." I said. Then I slipped past Hayama, walking on ahead.

As we passed by each other, Hayama said, "I'm going to team up with Yukinoshita… What will you do?"

"…I'm not doing anything," I spit, and without turning around, I kept going down the hallway. I got the feeling I heard a sigh behind me.

What I'd said probably wasn't true—but truthfully, I couldn't do anything.

I couldn't see any points of Yukinoshita's to argue against. What she was saying made sense.

I didn't even know if it was okay for me to oppose this in the first place.

There was no reason for it.

If Yukinoshita was saying she'd run in the election, then she would unquestionably be the best candidate, and she was basically already elected. And of course, she was good enough to do it, and she also had Hayama's help, too.

I was walking along in such a daze that when I got back to the classroom, I realized I'd forgotten to have lunch.

X X X

Partly because of my hunger, I didn't absorb anything from my afternoon classes. I don't even know if I heard any of it.

But I was facing forward through every class. When I turned backward, I'd see Yuigahama and Hayama, and the intrusive thoughts would return.

I gave up on listening to the class or thinking and just leaned on my hand, alternating between napping and pretending to be asleep. I got through fifth and sixth period like this, until finally, it was time for homeroom.

Days like this, it's best to go home as fast as possible.

After the homeroom teacher made the announcements, we were finally set free.

The after-school bustle felt like it was going on in another world, somehow. I stayed apart from the din, getting ready to go and then standing from my seat. I went out into the hallway, and then when I headed for the school entrance, a voice came to me from behind.

"W-wait up!" I turned around to find Yuigahama running up to me. She seemed flustered, but she caught her breath and then said slowly, "Um…do you want to go home together?"

"I ride my bike. And our homes are in different directions." I gave her the completely obvious answer and said nothing more. I didn't get any feelings mixed up in this.

But Yuigahama didn't back down. "Yeah. So then…just that far," she said, pointing which way, I didn't even know.

Seeing the look on her face, I figured, *Oh, she's not gonna back down.*

Well, stopping by Yuigahama's apartment would mean I'd be kinda going the long way around, and I'd still get home. Even if I did go straight home, it wasn't as if there was anything in particular for me to do.

Besides, I basically understood what she wanted to talk about. Because so did I.

"…I'll go get my bicycle, so wait there," I said, pointing to the side entrance, then started walking.

"Oh, I'll go with you," Yuigahama replied and followed behind me.

"No, it's fine." I stopped her, then hurried over to the bicycle parking. With so many people at school now, it'd be embarrassing to go to the bicycle parking together. Worst of all, it'd draw attention to her. All the more so if she was at the bicycle parking lot when she didn't bike to school. I knew she was popular with boys, too. I got the feeling it wasn't very good for her to be seen like that.

I hurried to unlock my bike and headed to the side entrance.

Yuigahama was waiting for me at the side entrance, and when she noticed me, she waved her arm high.

C'mon, seriously. People notice this stuff.

I pushed my bicycle along, and when I was beside her, I prompted her to go. She nodded back at me and started walking.

I remembered which way her apartment was. I was fairly sure it was in a corner of the apartment block a few minutes walking from the station. It'd be fastest to bike there or take the bus, and I think there's a bus stop right in front of it, too. Yuigahama normally took the bus to school.

First, we went toward the station, going along the road by the park near the school. The leaves of the trees in the park had all fallen, and there were no children around playing. But the road by the park was sparsely populated with some intermittent clusters of students walking home from school. We were among those.

I just pushed my bicycle silently along, and she kept her lips shut as she walked.

It was as if the both of us were looking for the right moment to bring it up.

Maintaining this uncomfortable silence, we turned onto the road that curved along the apartment buildings. The slanting rays of the sun descended upon us through the shadows of the buildings.

A northern wind blew through the pale light of the sun. Its cold made me huddle in on myself.

Suddenly, she opened her mouth. "So…Yukinon's running, huh? In the election."

"Uh-huh." That was what was on our minds now. Yukinoshita hadn't even told Yuigahama of her intention to run. What was she thinking, and what did we want to do? I assumed that was what Yuigahama wanted to talk about.

But she said something completely different. "I think… I think I'll try running, too."

"What?" I asked back, turning to face her as I wondered what she was talking about all of a sudden.

But she pressed her lips tight, looking at the ground at her feet with a serious expression. So I fully considered the context of what she'd said.

If she'd said she was going to run, then it wasn't a joke. She was saying she was going to run as a candidate in the same election for student council president as Yukinoshita.

"Why…?" I asked. I didn't think Yuigahama would want to be student council president. Frankly, she's not the type.

She kicked a pebble at her feet. It bounced once, then immediately fell into the gutter. "'Cause I was thinking, you know, I've got nothing. There's nothing I can do or help with. So maybe if

I was on the council, I could actually do something." When she finished saying that, she lifted her face. She must have felt shy about speaking so seriously and was smiling bashfully to cover it.

When I failed to offer any reply, that smile disappeared.

Only after that did I manage to speak. "Actually do something…? You can't just make such a selfish decision on your own."

"I'm not being selfish." Yuigahama stopped. Her head was drooping down, so I couldn't see her face. But her declaration had an accusatory edge. It was the first time I'd ever heard her speak like that. "Everyone else's been selfish." Her voice wasn't at all loud. There was quiet anger in it.

It was true that I had no right to tell her that. Ultimately, during the school field trip, I'd done what I'd done selfishly, of my own accord. Of course, Yukinoshita had done the same when she'd decided to run in this election, too. We had been making nothing but self-centered decisions.

But even so, that was no reason for Yuigahama to be running.

"Have you really thought it over?" I asked.

Yuigahama nodded and looked down. "I have. I thought long and hard about it, and I figured this is the only way." She continued, words faltering. Her gloveless hands were clenching one strap of her backpack. "This time around, we're going to try getting things done. Because we realized we've been letting you handle everything."

"I haven't done anything."

"I dunno about that…" Her smile looked fragile. She tilted her head a little.

"It's true. So there's no reason for you to run." That was all I could say.

At the very least, I had truly never done anything good. Not a single thing worthy of praise or acclaim. I was just flailing around with my own selfish theories.

So there was no need for her to show this kind of consideration.

"But that's not the only reason." Yuigahama looked far away, toward the school. "If Yukinon becomes student council president, I think she'll focus on the job. And I know she'll be the best there ever was, and it'll be good for the school… But…it'll probably end our club."

"It's not going to disappear." I wasn't exactly lying; the club

called the Service Club would remain.

But Yuigahama shook her head. Though her hair wasn't that long, it fluttered about, shining in the setting sun. "It will. During the cultural festival and the athletic festival, Yukinon was only focused on the one thing. And you know that, too."

"…" I understood that well. Every time a request related to a big event had come, we'd always been focused on it.

Yukinoshita could only do so much. Of course, she could do far more than your average person, but she still had a limit. If she were to become student council president, the sort of job that basically had some kind of work to do all throughout the year, the Service Club would be unlikely to continue activities as before.

As I was thinking, Yuigahama took one step out ahead of me. "You know…" She spun toward me, her skirt fluttering. Folding her hands behind her, she stopped on the spot.

Then she looked straight at me.

" I…love this club."

And that's why I want to protect it, her few words told me.

"I…love it." As she repeated those words, tears were building in the corners of her eyes.

Seeing that, I was speechless.

What should I say at a time like this? All that went through my mind was irrelevant impressions, and nothing would come out of my mouth.

Suddenly noticing I wasn't saying anything, Yuigahama hurriedly wiped at her eyes with her sleeve, then forced a smile. "W-well, um… I figured if I become student council president, if I kinda half-ass it, maybe I could keep on with the club. I mean, you know me. Other people won't expect much from me, you know?"

“Hey, but still—,” I started to say, but she stopped me. She took one step forward, gently laid her hand on my chest, then gave a tiny shake of her head, keeping me from saying anything else.

Her face was so close. She was looking down, so I couldn’t really see her expression. I was unable to back away, frozen there.

Slowly, she raised her face. “…That’s why I’m going to beat Yukinon.”

There were no longer any droplets in her eyes, and I sensed strong determination in her gaze.

I was about to open my mouth to say her name when she hopped back, putting a step’s worth of distance between us.

Then she glanced all around, hitching her backpack up her shoulder again and babbling, “Oh, this is far enough! …S-see you!”

“Y-yeah…see you later,” I replied with a short acknowledgment as she trotted off in a rush.

She must have heard that, as she turned to me again. “Bye, Hikki!” she said with a little wave.

I watched her go through the slanting rays of the sun, off where my hand wouldn’t reach. The spot on my chest where she’d touched a moment ago felt like it was being constricted.

I casually raised a hand, then pushed my bicycle back the way I’d come.

When I reached the main road, I threw my leg over my bicycle. As I pedaled, I wrapped myself in my thoughts.

Yuigahama had said she was going to become the student council president in order to protect where she belonged, the Service Club.

If there was anyone who could beat Yukinoshita, it might be her. Considering her presence in the upper caste as well as her horizontal connections, she surpassed Yukinoshita, and she could well split Hayama’s base. I would no longer be able to predict the votes of those who would have supported Hayama, including Miura.

Most of all, Yui Yuigahama was a wonderful girl.

That was why it wouldn’t be strange at all for her to become student council president.

Yukino Yukinoshita and Yui Yuigahama.

One of the two would probably win the election. And then, no matter which of them lost, Iroha Isshiki would maintain her

reputation.

There was no better move to make than that.

This would resolve the request we accepted from Isshiki.

But as a result—

—I was sure the club would be over.

Despite what Yuigahama had said, she'd probably do a proper job as student council president. I'm sure at first she'd only play the part, but that would only get her so far.

She didn't look like it on the surface, but she was a hard worker, and she took care of people. She was sure to become a student council president who was adored by the council; she would become unable to let those people down. That would lead her to try to wholly fulfill her responsibilities as student council president. Once that happened, it would become difficult for her to show up at the club.

As a result, our club activities would come to an end.

It would become something completely different, and all that would be left would be the name "Service Club" and the room.

I'd realized that already.

And not just me—they had, too.

If they were both satisfied with this choice, then I was fine with it. It wasn't okay for me to control other people's decisions based on my own personal sentimentality.

But…

But even so…

It hurts when someone forces you into a role.

It was really hard to watch them attempt to protect something important to them and, as a result, let go of that very thing.

Even as I knew you can't have a teen drama without something being sacrificed.

Even as I was arrogantly claiming that I wasn't a sacrifice, so I don't need pity or sympathy.

What a cruel contradiction.

Twilight and nighttime dark mixed in the sky as the cold wind tormented my fingertips. I'd been pedaling so frantically, but at some point, my legs had stopped.

7

Needless to say, **Komachi Hikigaya**'s kindness is there.

Moving into late November, the nights got pretty cold.

But I'd pedaled as fast as I could about half the way home, so sweat had soaked my clothes. Panting hard, I went inside.

I went straight to the bathroom, peeled off my uniform, switched on the shower over my head. I'd set the water on the hot side, and it stung my cold body.

Even after I washed myself clean, I didn't feel any better. I gave up and turned off the water.

All I saw reflected in the mirror was a drowned rat. My expression was dismal as hell, as always.

I came out of the bathroom and dried off, then changed into my lounging clothes.

When I went up to the living room on the second floor, the only occupant was the cat, Kamakura. He was doing that loaf thing, fast asleep with his paws curled under his body.

When you're tired, nothing beats animal therapy. All that pedaling had built up tons of lactic acid in my muscles, and I was really beat.

I sat down on the sofa, rolled Kamakura over, stretched him out, flicked his ears, smooshed his paws, and burrowed my face in his stomach fur. *Oh man, this is so much fun.*

Having been submitted to a smooshing, Kamakura looked at me with extreme annoyance and a blatant aura of suspicion, like *What the hell is with this guy…?* He really hates this stuff; man, he's so funny.

"Ha-ha-ha…agh." At some point, my laughter turned into a sigh.

“Sorry.” I apologized to Kamakura with a pet, but he jerked his head away and leaped off the sofa. He continued on to the door, jumped at the knob, and adeptly opened it. Then he left the living room.

Whoa, close the door. It gets cold in winter, you know.

Now that Kamakura had left, I was completely alone.

Normally, this would be a precious time to pass in calm comfort. But the silence just made the same thoughts run through my head on repeat.

I was thinking about the student council election. I don’t know how many times I’d had this internal dialogue.

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. If one of them became student council president, what was the problem likely to occur? The end of the Service Club. I wasn’t bothered by that in itself. That was inevitable anyway. I’d known it would end, sooner or later. Even if nothing happened, we’d eventually graduate, and the club would be finished.

So then what was the problem? I’d known all along that it wouldn’t continue forever. What was the problem with that?

No, wait. Why am I trying to find problems in the first place?

In fact, the problem of trying to find problems was the problem, or in other words, the l’Cie of the Pulse fal’Cie would cause the Purge, and Cocoon would…

I received no answers, whether I considered it seriously or facetiously.

I stared at the ceiling and breathed a deep sigh. I wasn’t going to get any answers when I didn’t even know what the problem was.

When it came down to it, I was lacking in a prerequisite *reason*…

A reason to do something, to move into action. A reason to treat that problem as something to fix.

I had no reason from which to originate, so the problem wouldn’t materialize.

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama announcing their candidacies had basically settled the matter of Isshiki, too. I’d say theirs was the better plan, more likely to succeed than mine.

So then there was nothing for me to do.

So there was also no reason for me to oppose the two of them over Isshiki.

But I still felt uneasy, like I had to do something. I kept asking

myself, *Is it fine this way?* And then, each time, I'd utterly defeat myself in argument and then raise the problem again, and I'd argue it down again, over and over.

What a difficult personality. Having a middling degree of intelligence creates some real head-scratchers.

But I'd resolved most issues somehow, so far. I'd never had anybody to talk to about my concerns in the first place, and even if I did, I wouldn't have talked to them.

You should only lean on people within your reach—and only to the degree that they can support you. If you go too far, you'll end up going down together. It's like if your loan cosigner was someone you weakly called a "friend."

Going with that line of reasoning, the range of people I could rely on was extremely small.

Since I'm not good at giving support for someone else, I won't receive support, either.

If the both of us were to fall, that would mean spitting on the kindness of the person who had reached out to me. It would be disrespecting the trust of that person relying on me.

A loner's creed is to live without bothering others. Our dignity is in not becoming someone else's burden. Therefore, I take pride in generally being able to manage things myself.

That's why I don't rely on anyone, and no one relies on me.

If there is only one exception, then I guess it'd be family.

You're allowed to bother your family as much as you want. I don't care how much they bother me, either.

Matters of kindness and trust and possible or impossible aside, with your family, you can reach out, if nothing else, and lean on them without reservation—even if my dad is pretty much kind of a useless human being, even if my mom is always fairly busy and occasionally tends to badger me a lot, no matter what a good-for-nothing I am, and even if my little sister is shallow, despite how cute and scheming she is.

These relationships don't need a reason.

In fact, you can make "because they're family" into a reason for everything.

Of course, that can also become a reason for resenting or hating them, though.

If I were to rely on anyone now…

…who of my family would it be?

Well, this wasn't something that would work out somehow by talking to Mom or Dad… They'd be useless. Really, you know, they're there to support, occasionally scold, and love me. Before you bother yourselves over me, worry about your old age or your health or whatever. Live long lives, good grief.

Oh yeah, I think they're coming back late again tonight; corporate slavery is hard, huh? And as I thought to myself, the door to the living room creaked open.

Is it the cat again? I thought, turning around.

But it was Komachi who came in, wearing a slightly too-big tracksuit.

It seemed she'd come in for a study break to get a drink, as she completely ignored me and opened the fridge. But it seemed there was nothing much she was interested in, as she closed it again. Apparently, this was the only reason she'd come to the living room, and she made to leave right away.

Without thinking, I called out to her as she walked away. "Komachi."

"…What?" She turned only her head, looking at me out of the corner of her eye.

She's still angry… Maybe it wasn't time to talk to her yet. But now if I said it was nothing, then I'd hurt her feelings again.

Not knowing what to say, I groaned a bit before asking her a question. "Uhhhhh…do you want a coffee?"

Komachi gave a little nod. "…Yeah."

"…Roger." I stood up and got ready to make us some. I poured water into the electric kettle and clicked it on. As it heated up, I grabbed two mugs and prepared the instant coffee.

Komachi supported her head with her elbow on the kitchen counter and wordlessly waited for the water to boil.

I didn't say anything, either.

Eventually, the water boiled, and I poured it into the mugs. The scent of coffee rose with the hot water. Turning the handle toward Komachi, I handed her a mug. "Here."

"Mm." She took it and headed for the door. It seemed she meant to take it straight to her room.

Her actions said, *Don't talk to me until things have cooled off*, but still, I was not discouraged and called out to her. "Hey, Komachi…"

"…" She stopped in front of the door. But she didn't look toward me. She just silently waited for me to continue.

I worried saying this would make her disgusted with me, but I pushed through the unease and said it anyway. "…I want to ask your advice about something."

"Uh-huh. Komachi's listening." But she answered instantly, leaning against the wall.

I faced her directly for the first time in a week, and we looked each other in the eye, smiling like we hadn't in a while.

Komachi tucked her smile away for the moment and lightly cleared her throat. "But there's something you should say first, isn't there?"

She was right. We'd just been fighting, so it was asking too much to suddenly demand her help. Searching for the words I should say, I vigorously scratched my head. "…The other day was, like… I shouldn't have said that."

Komachi pouted, puffing up her cheeks. "Not only what you said. Your attitude sucked, and your personality, too. Plus that look in your eyes," she said.

"Yeah…" I couldn't argue with that.

And she kept going. "I'm sure it's gonna be your fault anyway, 'cause you did something."

"Yeah, true, true." She was completely right, and I had nothing to say in reply.

Her hounding was still not over. "And you haven't apologized, either."

"Ngh… That's true…" Now that she mentioned it, I got the feeling what I'd just said didn't count as an apology.

I opened my mouth to make a proper apology this time, and Komachi breathed a short sigh. Then she gave me a kind but exasperated smile. "But, well, this is you. So that's fine with Komachi, because Komachi is your little sister. So I'll forgive you."

"Well, thank you very much…" *I know I made her mad, but she's still getting a tad cocky here…* I think that grumpiness was pretty blatant in my voice and face. In fact, I was actively trying to make it come out.

Naturally, Komachi would notice that. She flicked her eyes away and cleared her throat dramatically. "And…Komachi's sorry, too." She bowed her head politely.

Seeing that, I smiled wryly. "Oh, don't worry about it. I'll forgive you, because I'm your big brother."

"Whoa, someone's gotten cocky now," she said, and we both

giggled. Then we slowly drank our coffee. There wasn't any regular milk, sugar, or condensed milk in it, but it tasted good anyway.

Komachi put her mug on the table and asked me, "So what happened?"

"It's kind of a long story."

"…I don't mind," she replied, then came over to the sofa and sat beside me.

X X X

I finished my long, long story, including the field trip and the series of events leading up to this student council election.

Komachi brought in some refills of the coffee from the kitchen and then placed them on the coffee table in front of the sofa.

"Oh…that really is like you, Bro." That was her first impression. "But listen, Komachi can understand that 'cause she's Komachi. I've lived with you forever, so I get it."

I reached out to my mug, too. Komachi had made my coffee with lots of milk and sugar, and it wasn't too hot.

She gently sat down beside me and brought her coffee to her lips. She took a sip, then lifted her head. "I laugh it off, like, *Oh, he's so dumb*. I'll think, *You're so hopeless*. And then…I'll be a little sad." She put her feet up on the sofa, bringing her knees in against her chest. "But other people won't act like that. I think they won't get it at all, and they'll feel really hurt."

I hadn't really been wanting others to understand. So this was probably the sort of thing you'd call self-satisfaction. To be honest, I hadn't done it for anyone else. So nobody was going to understand or sympathize with me.

The one exception was my sister, Komachi, but she smiled a little sadly at me. "You're kind to me, Bro, but that's possible because I'm your little sister. I think if I weren't, you wouldn't even be near me," she said.

"Oh, I don't know about that."

I considered it.

A Komachi who isn't my sister… Whoa, what's this super-ultra-high-spec ultra-marvelous beautiful girl? I can envision a future in which I would instantly propose to her, get rejected, then kill myself, so let's

absolutely make sure to stay away from her…

Yep, it'd definitely wind up like that. But I couldn't imagine a Komachi who wasn't my little sister in the first place. I think we still probably wouldn't date or anything, because anything about Komachi or little sisters aside, I can't hang around people anyway…

Komachi is Komachi. If she weren't my little sister, there'd be no point in that sort of speculation.

"Well, that aside, I am glad that you're my little sister. And that was worth a lot of Hachiman points."

"B-Bro…!" Komachi buried her face in her hands as if hiding moist eyes. She put on a big show, adding some sniffles and an emotional sob while she was at it. But the show was over surprisingly fast, and in the next moment, she said nonchalantly, "Well, in Komachi terms, if you weren't my bro, I think I'd stay away from you for sure. I wouldn't even be aware you existed."

…Hey? Are you still angry? Could you stop the verbal domestic violence? "Well, you say that, but I actually have some good points, don't I?"

"Nope. And I don't wanna do this. I mean, it's such a pain."

You didn't have to go that far… You just made your bro sad. And she said it with a pretty serious look on her face, too.

She really is not cute…

As I was getting grumpy and nearly clicked my tongue at her, Komachi suddenly smiled and bumped me with her shoulder. "But having been around you for fifteen years, Komachi's gotten a little attached, like *Guess that's just how he is*. Oh, that was worth a lot of Komachi points!"

Hmm, but what you said before scored pretty low, though.

But she was strangely convincing. "…Well, it's true, fifteen years will do that." Accumulated time has a proper weight to it—enough that I could find my uncute little sister this cute.

Suddenly, there was a weight on my shoulder. Looking over, I found Komachi leaning her full weight against me. "…Fifteen years, starting now… No, the future's even longer than that."

She had to be talking about possibilities. She was talking about the possibility that, like how Komachi and I had spent fifteen years building our relationship, maybe you could build up time like that with someone else.

But for me right now, it still didn't seem very realistic. "Don't give me your cheap logic," I shot back at her.

Miffed, Komachi retorted, “Just how many years do you think Komachi has been listening to your cheap logic?” Then she shoved a finger into my cheek. “You’ve got a future! More after this! You got that?!”

“O-okay…,” I replied.

She nodded like, *Good*, and removed her finger from my cheek. Then her expression turned a little serious. “…It’s not only you. Komachi’s got a future, too. I like Yukino and Yui. So I don’t want the Service Club to disappear. I mean, I really think if you lose it now, you’ll end up growing apart.”

You can see someone every day, but you won’t necessarily become close. But if you stop seeing someone you’ve become close with, you’ll naturally grow apart. Human emotions can’t be explained as simple proportional relationships.

Head still leaning on my shoulder, she asked in a sweet, cajoling tone, “So can you make it work out for me and my friends?”

That was the singular answer I got from Komachi.

I think if she hadn’t said that, I wouldn’t have been able to do anything.

Some part of me had been looking, this whole time, for a reason to try to hold on to that place, the time I spent there. “…If it’s for my little sister, I guess I’ve got no choice,” I muttered.

I’m a wonderful big brother; I’ll do almost anything for my younger sister.

She chuckled smugly and then, in a particularly monotonous manner, said, “Yeah, it’s for Komachi’s sake. Because Komachi’s selfish. Whoops, you got no choice now!”

“That’s true.”

I aggressively rubbed her head, and she squealed, shaking her head along with my hand.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Komachi replied proudly.

I withdrew my hand and glanced at the clock. “It’s about time to go to bed. It’s late.”

“Yeah. Then, good night.”

“Yeah, night.”

Komachi stood up and returned to her room. I watched her go, then I leaned back on the sofa again.

I’d obtained a proper reason and a problem.

I still didn’t know Yukinoshita’s true intention. So I still couldn’t say anything about that.

And I couldn’t accept what Yuigahama was doing. But I could understand it—because it was similar to what I was doing.

My old methods were never about self-sacrifice. And they weren’t wrong. I’d drawn a hand with few cards, and so I’d done the absolute best I could with the utmost efficiency. And my actions had even brought good results, sometimes. So from my own subjective perspective, I could call that perfect.

But if an objective perspective exists, that perfection falls apart.

To eyes full of pity and sympathy, it would look like trite narcissism. Pity and sympathy are an expression of contempt for another person. Self-pity is an act that belittles the self. Both are despicable and utterly repulsive.

However, pity and sympathy probably aren’t the only outside perspectives. I realized this for the first time when it was shoved in my face so plainly.

When you just don’t want to hurt someone.

That feeling isn’t pity or sympathy.

That’s why I would never call what they’d done, could not let what they had done be called, sacrifice.

In order to keep Yukino Yukinoshita or Yui Yuigahama from becoming student council president…

…what was the one thing Hachiman Hikigaya could do?

X X X

It was the day after making up with Komachi. I’d been thinking the

whole time, since morning.

What was it that Hachiman Hikigaya could do?

Nothing came to mind, and I was seriously freaking out.

H-huh? This is strange… I felt like I could do anything last night, though…

Thinking about it, given my current position, I'd never had many options in the first place.

For example, let's say I was to declare candidacy for student council president and run against them. Then what? No one would nominate me, and so I wouldn't even be allowed to run.

Or I could obstruct their campaigns. This would be really pointless if it were just me, too. Besides, slanderous flyers and nasty rumors were the wrong way to go about things. I didn't want to drag them down or show contempt for them.

Not only was I stuck at just two ideas, one of them was obstruction… There was shockingly little I could do. It seemed matters that would inevitably be based on majority rule, like student council elections, were incredibly incompatible with someone like me.

But I'd brought this on myself. There was no one I could ask for help, either. I wasn't the sort of person who would be allowed to trouble people—I hadn't built the relationships for that. Present me was suffering for past me's choices. And most likely, the present me would make the future me suffer, too.

My brain had been working and working at this the whole time since I'd come to school, but I still couldn't think of a way to fix this problem—even though I'd finally obtained a goal.

Even once we were on lunch break, I still couldn't think of anything. There wasn't much time left until the election. The vote was on the Thursday of next week, and today was Tuesday. That was a full week, but my only available manpower was myself, and I had no plan to oppose the girls' plans, to boot.

Preventing Iroha Isshiki from getting elected as president while also keeping Yukinoshita and Yuigahama from winning seemed impossible, no matter what amazing plan I might come up with.

My one option was to come up with some other candidate—but I'd shot down that idea myself.

Should I put off the election? Or dismantle the whole system of student council elections? No, I had no method of accomplishing that. I was at total stalemate.

But still, I couldn't sit and do nothing.

In search of something I could manage on my own, I headed to the library.

At lunchtime, the library was deserted. Not only was it forbidden to eat and drink there, the library was a long walk from the classrooms, so it wasn't a very popular spot for lunch. The only time it was crowded was before testing times.

I surveyed the shelves and decided to search for civil documents and materials that might have some information about Soubu High School history, or summaries of student council elections. If I was going to try to beat the girls in the election, I'd have to think up some appropriate election promises and an election speech. If something came to mind while I was fishing around these documents, that'd be great. If I could discover a loophole in the election rules, that would be a real find. However, I found no such convenient documents as I went back and forth between various shelves.

I saw something that looked about right and went to pull it out. Reaching out to the very top shelf, I hooked it with my finger. The book slid out and fell.

"Yikes." I jerked my head aside automatically, but the heavy book smacked into my chest, knocking the breath out of me, and then spit got in my windpipe and made me choke.

And while I was coughing and hacking, the book next to the large empty space tipped over and landed with a *tump*, and then they were all falling over like dominoes clattering down, while the thinner and lighter books fell to the floor with a rustle of paper.

That noise, as well as the sound of me coughing and hacking, was especially loud in the quiet library, and the few visitors gave me cold looks. Oh, I could understand their feelings. If I saw some idiot making a racket in the library, I'd act the same way.

And so I somehow managed to restrain my coughing and endeavored to put things back where they'd been.

There were books scattered around my feet, and books on the shelf fallen over.

Agh, what do I do about this? Geez.

I sighed roughly and then crouched to pick up the books, and that was when a haughty voice descended upon me. "How wretched you are, Hachiman Hikigaya. Fwa-ha-ha!" I knew without turning around—Yoshiteru Zaimokuza was standing behind me, letting out

a thunderous laugh.

"Don't be stupid. This is my default wretchedness. Do you need something?"

"A foolish question. I'm nigh always here at lunch. And as I knew you were here via ESP, I elected to take a moment of your time!"

Damn it, he's such an obnoxious, lame pain in the ass. Even a second of conversation with him is so exhausting. My back was bent over to begin with, and now my shoulders slumped even further.

Seeing my state, Zaimokuza unexpectedly squatted down and met my eyes. "…Herm? Whatever is the matter, Hachiman? …Do you have some concern?

"…No, not really anything important." Nothing I'd talk about with someone else.

But Zaimokuza adjusted his glasses with a click and said, "Talk to me."

"No, it's fine. It's not worth talking to anyone about."

"What nonsense! How much blathering have I done to you? …I can listen to your blathering, at least… Heh, I'm so cool when I reach out to the weak."

Very proud of yourself, aren't you, good sir? And weak? Hey… Are you one of those guys who wants to nurse a fragile girl at her bedside? I kind of get that.

But regardless of what his motives were, I hadn't expected to hear something like that from Zaimokuza, and I couldn't help but smile. "…The only cool thing you said was the first part. So who'd you rip it off from?" I said.

Smugly, Zaimokuza said, "No, 'twas I."

"You dork. You're not allowed to say anything actually cool." I was exasperated at myself for actually being impressed.

But Zaimokuza, huh…? He'd completely vanished from my memory until this very minute, but maybe he could help.

If it was him…

Yes, if it was him, bothering him wouldn't hurt me emotionally, and there wasn't even a question of whether this would damage him or not—just standing there, Zaimokuza is a fatal wound. He is the living irredeemable. In a way, he's the type of creature closest to myself.

I couldn't count on him for anything. But I could trust the fact of his presence, which could destroy both good vibes and bad. Most

of all, we'd been a gym class duo for some time. A hopeless and crummy duo, though.

"…Zaimokuza, I have a favor to ask."

"Hrm, so be it. So then what shall we do first?"

Surprised that he answered instantly, I couldn't yet think of what I'd ask of him. "Yeah… First, help me clean these up."

"O-okay… I shouldn't have said that after all…"

He'd probably been hoping for something cooler. Zaimokuza went completely back to normal, muttered that quietly, and obediently started organizing the shelf.

Sorry. Though I couldn't say this for sure, I'd never end up asking Zaimokuza for help. It'd probably end horribly. Me and Zaimokuza pairing up. Not even worth considering.

X X X

I roughly summarized the student council election situation to Zaimokuza and put off explaining anything about my specific plans until after school.

During the afternoon classes, I pondered over how to work Zaimokuza into the current situation. But unfortunately—or should I say of course?—it didn't seem like he'd fit in at all. Was there anything Zaimokuza and I could do together…?

I never did think of anything before the end of school came. I had to meet up with Zaimokuza then. I'm kind of a jerk, thinking this was a bit of a pain in the ass when I'd been the one to make this request of him.

Homeroom ended, and everyone else left the classroom. Their destinations were various: Some were going to their clubs, some were going home, and some were going out to have fun.

One of these groups remained together in the classroom and didn't leave. This combination of blonde, brown, and black hair naturally drew the eyes of those around them.

Holding her head as she scratched at her pinkish-brown hair, Yuigahama moaned. "Fnggggh, hmm…" She had a mechanical pencil in her hand, but it didn't look like it was going to move.

In the seat beside her, Miura was pulling and releasing her blonde sausage curls when she suddenly thought of something. "Oh,

wouldn't it be cool to come to school in our own clothes?"

"That's it!" Yuigahama pointed at Miura, then immediately wrote that down on a piece of paper. But then her hand stopped again, and she started moaning again.

Ebina, sitting opposite them, was also thinking and going "Hmm" as she combed through her black bob with her fingers. "It'd also be nice if they stopped doing bag inspections. They really do it from time to time. It's embarrassing when you have the stuff, you know? Like, I'll have *doujinshi* I borrowed from friends still in my bag."

"That's just you, Ebina," Miura said, and Ebina chuckled gleefully.

"O-okay, well, I-I'll write it down," Yuigahama said.

"You don't hafta write that down. More importantly, I wanna eat lunch on the roof."

"I'll take that, too!"

It seemed the three of them were thinking up election promises to use in Yuigahama's campaign speech. Hayama and the guys were probably not around because they had their club. Hayama was doing Yukinoshita's campaign speech, so maybe he couldn't help Yuigahama anyway.

Ever since Miura had seen Hayama hanging out with Orimoto and her friend the other day, she'd been prone to agitation and zoning out, but that must not have been on her mind when the guy in question wasn't around, as today she was brisk as usual. "Also, the bus is too crowded. It's annoying." She spun her hair around her finger and folded her long legs in the other direction… In fact, she may have been a little meaner than usual.

"I dunno if that's the job of the student council… But sure, I'll write it down." After writing that, Yuigahama considered and went "Hmm" again. But after scratching her head with the mechanical pencil, she stopped writing.

Then Ebina clapped her hands. "Oh, I want LCD tablets in the art room."

"I…don't really know what those are, but I'll write it down!"

Watching the three of them from a distance, I stood from my seat.

…Yuigahama was serious about running in the election. Her approach, and everything she was doing here, was very much like her.

X X X

When I got to the Saize near the station, I found Zaimokuza already there. You don't need to bother searching around the restaurant to find the guy, so he's convenient at times like these. I went to his seat, pulled out a chair, and sat down. "Sorry to make you wait," I said.

Zaimokuza waved a hand as if to say, *Don't worry about it*. He was munching on something, and there was an empty plate on the table. It seemed he'd just eaten something. Based on the size of the plate and the crumbs there, it was focaccia. Beside the plate was an open container of sugar syrup. He was eating focaccia with syrup? Is that supposed to be good?

Oh yeah, I missed lunch. Should I order something, too? I was opening the menu when I suddenly realized—talking with Zaimokuza wasn't going to turn this situation around so easily, and it was also highly likely that this would drag on for a while. So then it'd be best to have dinner, while I was at it.

I pulled out my phone and called Komachi. Instead of ringing, some song I don't know jingled at me. *Why does her cell phone always sing when I call it…?* I was thinking when Komachi answered.

"Hello, hellooo."

"I don't need dinner today."

"Why not?"

"I'm having a, well, sort of a meeting-like thing with Zaimokuza."

"…Hmm. Where are you eating?"

"The Saize close to school."

"Got it!"

"Uh-huh." I hung up abruptly. It's nice and easy when you can communicate all that stuff in less than thirty seconds, with the minimal amount of words.

Zaimokuza, who'd been watching me talk on the phone, gulped down the rest of his cola and spoke with tons of motivated energy. "Now then, Hachiman. Let us begin…though I don't really know what's beginning."

Acting this eager before he even knew what was going on didn't exactly inspire confidence in me. It actually just made me uneasy instead. "First, can I eat something? I'm hungry."

“Herm, well, an army marches on its stomach, as they say. Eat what you please.”

“Thanks,” I said and immediately pressed the order button. A professional Saizeriyan (referring to a user of Saizeriya) never hesitates in ordering. I remember most of their regular menu, so I check only their seasonal and new items. Then in the time before the server comes to take my order, I instantly consider every possibility and make my decision.

By the time the server had come around, I’d already decided on my order.

“Milan-style pilaf, the assorted grilled meats, and the drink bar.”

With a *beep, beep* on a smartphone-esque device, the server input my order.

Zaimokuza timidly raised his hand. “Oh, and spicy chicken, too… Oh, and also the hashed meat with turmeric rice.”

You’re still gonna eat…? Well, it’s fine. The chicken is good.

X X X

We spent a little under an hour eating, and once my stomach was full, I finally decided to get to the subject at hand. I tossed back my coffee and said to Zaimokuza, “Okay, so I explained to you about the election, right?”

“Aye. ’Twas about how you would prevent those two from winning.” Zaimokuza nodded dramatically. But after a little thinking, he groaned. “Fmm, but, well…”

“What?”

“Why must they not be elected?” He asked me that very simple question with a tilt of his head.

Well, that’s the normal response, I guess. In fact, I doubted many would be against either being president. Or more like the majority just didn’t care who it was. I had my personal reason, but I hesitated to be honest about it. I didn’t feel like I could explain it right anyway.

So instead, I asked Zaimokuza, “If Yukinoshita or Yuigahama got elected, what do you think will happen to the school?”

“Herm, I fear ’twould become a world unkind to one such as

I…," Zaimokuza answered, sweat rising on his forehead.

"Yeah, that's all you need to know."

Though actually, no matter which of them became student council president, I doubted the school would change much. A high school student council doesn't have the power to change anything fundamental about a school. What I'd told him was just some BS logic I'd come up with. I didn't think that would actually convince him, but it was my only option if I wanted to get through this.

"So as for what I'm going to do specifically…" I was about to move the conversation along when I got a phone call from Komachi. I casually raised a hand at Zaimokuza, got his permission with a look and a "Sorry," then answered my phone.

"Hello?"

"Oh, there he is!" Her voice came not from my phone but from behind me. I turned around to see Komachi there, in her school uniform.

"…Huh? Why're you here?"

"I heard you were having a meeting…so I'm here!"

Right when I was about to complain, like, *Come on, don't give me that; I didn't invite you…*, someone unexpected came up from behind her.

"We're not bothering you, are we?" He was wearing that familiar gym uniform with his tennis bag slung over his shoulder, standing there idly. Smiling bashfully like he was a little embarrassed, he was more angelic than that picture of an angel decorating the wall.

"T-T-T…"

T…T-T-T-T-Totsukaaa! Oh dear, I'm so shocked, I can't talk right.

I was so startled meeting him here, of all places, I nearly wound up thinking we were destined to be together. But based on what I could see here, this was something Komachi had schemed up, and so this was probably not love but *Nisekoi: False Love*. That was a relief. I could be at ease, build my Gundam, and fight!

As I stuttered to a halt, not quite able to respond, Totsuka looked at me with concern. So as to soothe his worry as soon as possible, I quickly found a reply. "No, not at all! Anyway, will you sit down?" I briskly moved my bag off the seat beside me and pulled out the chair. The plan here was that logically, Totsuka would sit there! Am I a genius or what?

"Oh, or do you want to eat something?" I said to the picture of

an angel hanging on the wall, in a demonstration of my gentlemanliness. Oh, whoops! My mistake! Got my angels confused. Why does Saize have an angel picture on the wall anyway?

"Oh, so then…," Totsuka said with no particular suspicion as he sat down next to me.

With a cry of "Fngh!" Zaimokuza offered him the menu. He must have been too nervous to form words. Me and Zaimokuza were making a surprisingly good coordinated play here.

"Maybe I'll have the peperoncino… Oh, but garlic, huh…? Hmm…" Totsuka eyed the menu, weighing his options. I didn't reach straight out to the call button this time.

Go ahead, take your time choosing. Order whatever you like, be it peperoncino or Pepelotion.

As Totsuka was considering his order, I stood beside Komachi and leaned in to whisper in her ear, "Komachi, what the hell is going on here?"

"If you're gonna do this thing for Komachi, then Komachi's gotta put in some effort, too, right?"

Ohhh, you've put in a real effort for me. I reached out to pat Komachi's head, but she smoothly dodged my hand and stepped back. Then she puffed out her chest a bit smugly. "And so I recruited a whole bunch of people to help!" And then, with a "Ta-daa!" she spread her arms and pointed.

She was gesturing toward Kawa…Kawaguchiko? No, was it Yamanakako? Well, Kawa-something is fine. *Wait, Komachi knew her number, too? I don't even know her name.*

Kawa-something stuffed her hands in her pockets, glancing at me with a grumpy pout on her lips. "Why me…?" she muttered quietly. When her eyes met mine, she went silent with an "Urk!"

Awww, I'm sorry you had to come here when you so clearly didn't want to.

Well, Kawa-something was from my school, so I could understand her being here. As a constituent in the election, you couldn't say she had absolutely nothing to do with it.

But the other one really had nothing to do with this. "So why's that here, too?" I asked Komachi.

And then said irrelevant article quite cheerfully and briskly replied, "I'm not a thing! I'm Taishi Kawasaki!"

Uh, like I said, why are you here…? Oh, is it to let me know that Kawa-something's name is Kawasaki? Thanks.

But it seemed that was not the case. Komachi scratched her head with a laugh. “Well…even Komachi doesn’t know Saki’s number.”

“Oh, that’s why.” That made sense. “Well, you got ahold of her, so you don’t need that anymore, right?”

“I’m not a thing! I’m Taishi Kawasaki!” Taishi insisted once more, not discouraged.

If your big sister did that much insisting, I wouldn’t keep forgetting her name, I thought.

Meanwhile, Kawasaki was glaring at me. “Did you just say you didn’t need him here?”

“No, um, I do need him, yes…” Mostly as a mental stabilizer for Kawasaki. *Please stop glaring daggers at me like it’s kill or be killed or* Kill la Kill…

“Anyway, let’s sit down.” Komachi intervened and moved us over to sit at the table seats nearby. She prompted Kawasaki and Taishi to take the seats at the back, while she sat next to me. She’s the kind of competent girl who will casually choose the lowest-rank seat for herself.

We checked what everyone wanted and ordered as a group, and then once all the drinks were set out as well, Komachi cleared her throat. “Ahem. Without further ado, it’s time for the big plan to keep Yukino and Yui in the club!!” she announced, and Totsuka and Taishi followed with a patter of applause, while Zaimokuza nodded.

Komachi must have explained the situation to Totsuka and Kawasaki beforehand, as they didn’t particularly question anything. She really is such a competent little sister.

But Kawasaki leaned her cheek on her hand as she looked the other way to ask a different sort of question. “Was there a point in inviting me?”

“This is about Soubu High, and we really wanted to get your help,” Komachi said modestly with a cute smile and a “Tee-hee.”

Stop with the obsequious hand-wringing, come on.

But it seemed that kind of manipulation didn’t work on Kawasaki, and her attitude was unchanged. “Huh. I don’t think I’d be useful, though.”

“Oh, just getting your opinions will be helpful,” I said.

Kawasaki looked over at me for an instant, but her eyes immediately snapped away again. “…You don’t need my opinions,” she said.

But given the situation, her opinions would be useful.

Being in the lower reaches of a subtributary at school, the perspective of the lower class is ingrained in me. I also couldn't help but hold some bias toward the candidates, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. The views of someone who stood a certain distance from them would be more neutral. It was necessary to include that standard of judgment.

I was right about to explain this when the food came. I waited for the server to leave, but that created a break in the conversation, and I felt like I'd lost my moment. Well, I could skip to the conclusion. "I need you."

Kawasaki blinked. "O-oh… Then, well, okay…," she said, pulling her cup of iced tea toward her, turning her face away as she sucked on the straw. There was the slurping sound of an empty cup. Maybe it was because she was looking away. I wonder if she was tired.

I kind of felt bad for making her go along with all this trouble. "Sorry," I said.

Kawasaki removed her hand from the cup and leaned her cheek on it again. She looked at me for a moment as if thinking hard, then said, "It's fine. You doing stuff with that club…fits."

"What? Why?" There was nothing in particular about it that fit me. In fact, I hated words like *service*, *work*, and *labor*. I hated even the idea of them.

"N-never mind. I was just thinking that because you haven't been yourself lately."

A loner always has a great eye for observation. What keen insight. People-watching is the penchant of the loner.

Not myself, huh?

But if she was going to talk about what wasn't like me, then what I was doing now wasn't like me. I wasn't giving up. I was trying to protect the club. This was very clearly not like me.

But it seemed the others evaluated the situation differently. Komachi, sitting beside me, chuckled. "You've always got to put up some useless struggle, Bro."

Oh, that felt right.

Out of power and out of moves to make, but still repeatedly struggling in vain anyway, not bothered by the damage I take—wanting to get a hit or two back at the other guy if I'm gonna lose anyway, to make things suck for him…

That's like me.

Then let's play this game in a way that's like me.

First, let's observe some of the examples of success we have at hand.

I turned to Komachi. I seemed to recall she was on the student council in middle school. In other words, she'd run as a candidate and won before. She would have also managed a campaign before, too. So I decided to ask about that. "Komachi, how'd you win that election?"

She considered my question a moment before prefacing with "Hmm, I won by vote of confidence, so I don't think that'll be very useful…"

"That's fine—just tell me about your election strategy or whatnot."

"Okay… Well, before you declare candidacy, I guess I'd go and say, *Komachi's gonna do it!* And if you do that, most of the time, nobody'll fight you for it."

"I see…" It may not necessarily be that victory goes to whoever makes the first move, but if you do something to give others some pause, even those who are interested in running might hesitate. As expected of my little sister: shrewd.

I asked with a look if there was anything else, and Komachi folded her arms and began making thinking noises. "Also…boys might be at an advantage with stuff like this. Well, boys who are popular or well liked, though."

"Oh yeah, 'cause with middle schoolers, boys might have a hard time voting for a girl."

"Hmm, that's part of it, but…" Komachi was evasive, putting on a vague smile.

"What is it?" I asked, curious as to the rest of what she wanted to say.

Komachi stuck up her pointer finger. "If a girl's running, about half the girls'll be against her."

O-ohhh… I have been witness to my sister's transformation into a full-fledged member of women's society. Big Bro is happy that Komachi's grown but also a little sad…

Opposite us, Taishi was also a little disturbed. His head drooped, and he muttered, "Hikigaya's heart is black as coal…"

"Don't you go calling my sister blackhearted."

And your *sister's got more black going on—like her panties.*

But anyway, some of what Komachi had said could be of reference. “Using girl-on-girl hostility, huh…?”

Suddenly, Zaimokuza reacted. “The Meat to the Tigers Plot!”

Hearing that, Totsuka tilted his head. “But that would mean making Yukinoshita and Yuigahama fight, wouldn’t it?”

“True… And if everyone gets too into it, it’ll start proxy wars, or it could drag on afterward, too…,” Komachi noted solemnly.

That’s just a common opinion, right? You’re not talking based on personal experience? I’m worried…

But that was indeed a concern. Miura seemed like she might get into a proxy war… Then Yukinoshita would pay her back double and make her cry. Well, Miura aside, it would probably be best to avoid doing anything that would create a breeding ground for future problems. Or more to the point, causing unnecessary damage to Yuigahama and Yukinoshita was out of the question.

As everyone was racking their brains and wondering if there was anything else, Zaimokuza raised his hand, as did Taishi.

“So then, the Empty Fort Strategy!”

“Maybe it’d be a good idea to have some other candidates.”

Wow, Taishi. You totally ignored Zaimokuza and offered your own opinion, too, even though it had nothing to do with what he’d said. He might actually be the real deal.

But Yukinoshita and Yuigahama had already explored that option, and I’d rejected it. “I’ve already considered that. Besides, not just anyone could beat those two.”

Frankly speaking, the only one who could get more votes than either of them would be Hayama. And those votes were on Yukinoshita’s side now, while the girls from Hayama’s clique would be with Yuigahama. So no other candidate could stand up to them.

So Taishi reconsidered. “Oh, so if one person couldn’t beat them, maybe having lots could be a good idea.”

“Ohhh! Like a pile of dust!” Komachi clapped her knee.

I think she was referring to the saying that even dust makes a mountain if you pile up enough.

Flooding the ballot with candidates… True, doing that could reduce how many votes they got. Would it work? No, in that case, the candidates with the most votes would still win, in the end—in other words, one of the girls.

If opposing them wasn’t an option and neither was flooding the ballot, then I had to consider other angles. “A way to beat

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama…," I muttered, and Kawasaki, who'd been listening in silence until then, opened her mouth.

"Not like it matters, but if neither Yukinoshita nor Yuigahama are gonna do it, then who'll be president, in the end?

"…Oh."

Whoops. I completely forgot about Isshiki.

"Come on…" Kawasaki breathed an exasperated sigh.

Oh, I'm exasperated with myself here.

Preventing Yukinoshita and Yuigahama from becoming student council president would mean making Isshiki be president. This wasn't good—as long as the only candidates were those three, one of them had to be president. I really didn't have any options here.

Scratching my head, I reconsidered the situation, this time, with Isshiki included.

This was when a particularly nice-sounding voice came to my ears. "Hermmm, now that it's come to this, with our backs to the river…"

That remark made me lift my head, and my eyes met Zaimokuza's.

"Zaimokuza…"

"Herm." He gave a satisfied nod.

Good grief, Zaimokuza… I couldn't help but smile. "Thanks for everything. I'm grateful for the sentiment. But sorry. This is hard to say, but you've really been getting in the way."

"Hngeh!" Zaimokuza's head flung back.

Look, I mean, pushing that Chinese history angle is obnoxious…

However, no matter how many times he's kicked down, Zaimokuza is a man who will crawl his way up again. Just like Gen after he was told, "You're wheat! Become wheat!" he straightened his back once more.

"Kerfphon, 'twas you who proclaimed to me I should make suggestions! And thence I've been demonstrating my tactics, strategy, and art of war." Adjusting his glasses with a click, Zaimokuza looked at me.

"Well, you weren't the one to think up any of those ideas, though."

"Silence, you! Your chances of beating those two is equivalent to zero in the first place! You'll never win at the strategy level, and therefore, you must battle them on a tactics level."

That almost sounded legit…

Totsuka, who'd been listening, tilted his head. "Um…tactics and strategy are different?"

"Huh? Uh…a-aye, that it is. Look up the difference between the twain in your dictionaries!" Zaimokuza avoided the question by pushing through vigorously, then turned back to me. "Attempting to challenge them is wrongheaded in the first place."

"Well, yeah, that's true, but…" Frustrating as it was, I couldn't argue with him. It was true that I couldn't beat them in a fight. It wasn't that fighting was useless—it was more like I couldn't fight at all. The overwhelming advantage they had in this fight wasn't my only obstacle—I wasn't even standing on the stage of the competition.

This is no good. The situation is worse than I thought.

As I was scratching roughly at my head, Komachi said to me, "Bro."

"Hmm?"

"Snowflake is right."

"Yeah, Big Bro understands that, too, Komachi-chan…" I turned her aside for the moment in the way you might soothe a small child, like, *Let me think about it a bit, 'kay?*

I think the words of wisdom about winning without fighting were written by Sun Tzu, right? If I could become Sun Tzu, I might be able to figure something out. I am Sun Tzu, I am Sun Tzu, I am Sun Tzu, I am Sun Tzu… I'm some zoo? In other words, rather than fighting, the wisdom of victory can be found at the Chiba Zoo, huh…? Chiba is the greatest after all…

My train of thought had switched onto a very weird track when Komachi tugged on my sleeve. "Komachi doesn't particularly want you to win."

"Huh? Uh, but I have to win this election." If I didn't, one of them would end up being student council president.

"But, like, you haven't even announced candidacy, so forget winning." Kawasaki sighed contemptuously.

Dead sound argument… Oh, she really was right, though.

"Ah-ha-ha, well, Hachiman isn't bound by rules, right?" Totsuka attempted to mediate with a laugh, seeming a little confused.

He's such an angel. If Totsuka was gonna say that about me, then maybe it'd be nice not to be bound by the rule that is civil code volume 4, article 2.

As I was secretly basking in the comfort of Totsuka's comment,

Komachi tugged on me, forcing me to turn toward her. “Komachi just wants Yukino and Yui to stay in the Service Club. Honestly, I don’t really care about this student council election.”

“O-oh…but then there’s still Isshiki…” Being that I’d accepted this request, I couldn’t toss it aside without a second thought. Most of all, Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, Miss Hiratsuka, and Meguri would not say yes to that.

Seeing my reluctance, Komachi stared at me. “Bro, is this Isshiki person the most important here?”

“Well, no, not at all.”

“So then why is this so hard?”

“Uh, look, a request is a request,” I said.

Komachi took my face in her hands and pulled. “Which is more important, your work or Komachi?”

“Obviously, you. I have no intention of getting a job,” I said boldly and with all the love in the world as I swept aside Komachi’s hands.

“Process of elimination, huh…?” Totsuka smiled, either out of exasperation or worry.

Oh, but if it’s you, Totsuka, I’d unconditionally answer in your favor.

Komachi was pouting, and there was a little glare in her eyes, but her lips parted in a big smile. “I really can’t be honestly happy about that, but…well, okay, okay. Then what’ll you do, Bro?”

“I get what you’re saying. But I’m not going to force Isshiki to be student council president.”

That’s exactly what you’d call a sacrifice. That was why I couldn’t allow it. Even if there was a reason for abandoning her request, it would merely be a reason I’d thought up, one with nothing to do with Iroha Isshiki. Fundamentally, nobody has the right to sacrifice another to satisfy their own selfish reasons.

“…Yeah, okay. Well, this is how you do things, Bro.” Komachi sadly lowered her eyes a touch, but her expression quickly turned to an exasperated smile.

“Yeah, Hachiman is Hachiman after all.” Totsuka followed that up with a grin.

“Hmm…” Kawasaki seemed a little startled but smiled as if she found this very interesting, somehow. But when her eyes met with mine, she immediately averted them to gnaw at her straw. Then she glanced back at me to say, “N-not that it matters, but…what are

you gonna do?"

"Let me think a bit." I closed my eyes.

If the number one priority was retaining Yukinoshita and Yuigahama, as per Komachi's request, then Iroha Isshiki could be the only option for student council president. Since it was incredibly unlikely we could back any other candidates, I would ignore that, in this case.

Additionally, we couldn't hurt anyone.

So then what was the remaining issue?

Just one thing: what she herself wanted.

So then I had to come up with a way to turn that around.

In other words, I had to eliminate every reason Isshiki would have to not want to be the president.

Upon reaching this point, I opened my eyes.

"In essence, this means our initial approach was wrong…" Mine, Yukinoshita's, and Yuigahama's. "Well, in that case, I guess I have to negotiate with Isshiki."

"I hope she's someone you can even talk to… She's a girl, isn't she? Can you communicate?" Zaimokuza muttered.

His rationale was rather strange, but unfortunately, I basically agreed with him. And even Taishi beside him nodded for some reason. Seemingly out of curiosity, he asked, "What's Isshiki like?"

"Hmm…"

Iroha Isshiki. She made herself look gentle and sweet, but that was deliberate. There was a brutal divide between someone like Hayama and people like me and Tobe, who weren't even on her radar.

It was extremely difficult to put into words. But if I had to say, how would I put it?

"To make a comparison, she's like Komachi, except not at all cute or charming."

"Ohhh, that's bad," Taishi something or other said.

"Bro, what does that mean…?" Komachi's bright smile was scary.

"It's like, you know, it means you're cute," I said carelessly and petted her head. "Well, she's someone I can communicate with, so it'll probably be okay." I was pretty much certain about that. If Iroha Isshiki was deliberately putting on that character, you might say that made her suited to negotiation. If she was carefully calculating risk and return, then depending on what I told her, I

could influence her.

Now then, we'd have to arrange the bargaining chips for my efforts.

No—it might be more accurate to say *fabricate* them.

Anyway, I'd solidified my concept. Now I simply needed to work out the specifics of my method. For that, I needed a little more information.

"Kawasaki, list some people you think might be good for student council president."

"Huh?" She must not have been expecting me to address her, as she pointed to herself, blinking. Then she hesitated. "Uhhh…th-this is kinda sudden."

"Just take it one by one." I actually did want some time to gather my thoughts.

"All right, then…," she said, then tilted her head as she gradually brought up names. "I think Yukinoshita or Yuigahama would be fine. And…Hayama was his name? That sparkly, annoying dude."

Well, that was fair enough. Yukinoshita and Yuigahama would be starting to gather nominators in earnest, though, so that would exclude them from the idea I had in mind now. But that was what she thought of Hayama, huh…?

Kawasaki considered some more. "Ebina…could probably do the job, but she's not really cut out for it."

I agreed with that. She was the type who'd shine in a position where she had freedom. But if Kawasaki was bringing up Ebina's name so quickly, they must have gotten pretty friendly lately…

Then Kawasaki went "Oh" and added, "Definitely not Miura."

Bad blood there. But if she was bothering to bring up her name, she must have had Miura on her mind.

The names Kawasaki had come up with so far were prominent figures in our grade, and well-known, too. I'd call that an acceptable lineup.

But the next name she voiced was a surprising one. "And maybe Sagami…"

"What? Sagami?" I asked suddenly, frowning.

Kawasaki went sullen. "What's with that look? You're the one who asked."

"Oh, sorry. It's not like I've got a problem with you… But why?"

“Since she was chair for both the cultural festival and the athletic festival. It’d make sense for her to be president.”

“I see…” My impression of Sagami was awful, so I couldn’t even imagine it. But it was true that to someone who didn’t know anything about what had gone on with the committees, Sagami would have a history of relevant work. And second-years aside, for the first- and third-years, who wouldn’t really know what had actually happened, that title might actually hold some weight.

This was an unforeseen dark horse. Most of all, using Sagami wouldn’t hurt me personally. Tobe, who also occupied the category of people I wouldn’t care about using, I would also add as a candidate. Man, he’s such a good guy.

Okay, this was probably about all we were going to get. Now to consider the operational methods.

When I turned to Kawasaki to thank her first, she eyed me, then pouted her lips as if she wanted to say something. I asked her with a look if there was still something else, and she added at a mutter, “And, like…you.”

“Oh, that’s funny. But I’m not going to get thirty nominations.”

“I know. I just wanted to say it.” She jerked her head away.

If you know it, then don’t say it. That kind of thing gets my heart rate up a little.

Anyway, the pieces had basically all been assembled. I confirmed each one. “Hayama, Ebina, Miura, Sagami, and while we’re at it, Tobe. And Isshiki, huh? I’ll have these guys be candidates,” I said.

Komachi’s expression turned doubtful. “Huh? I thought you weren’t going to have that Isshiki person be the candidate.”

“She will be, in the end. That’s why we’ve got the others. They’re like the groundwork—or maybe like bait for her.” Well, I did in fact have a goal beyond that, but it’d be better to explain that further down the road. At this point, Komachi wasn’t all that convinced, so I figured it was best to take things one step at a time.

“Bait, huh…? Will anyone do that for you? Or wait, can you even ask them, Bro?”

“Ha-ha-ha, of course not. So I’m gonna throw in their names without asking, and then we gather tons of nominators.” And so to that end, there was one more person whose help I wanted to borrow. “Totsuka, can I use your name, too?”

He must have been surprised to be called on, as he gave me a

blank look. “Huh…? Well, but I…I don’t really understand this stuff…” He twisted around a little uncomfortably and looked down. He gazed at a corner of the floor for a while in silence before he looked at me with upturned eyes. “…You won’t do anything funny?”

“I promise,” I replied. I wouldn’t do anything funny, but I might do something queer. Oh, maybe I already was. Is this love?

Totsuka smiled at me. “…Then that’s fine. Take mine, too.”

“Thanks.”

Th-then I’ll take your name… Hachiman Totsuka would be nice, huh?! It kinda sounds like a shrine.

Anyhow, now all the pieces were assembled. Thanks to Totsuka, I felt like the pieces of my heart were all fitted in right, too, so the world was all love and peace in the end.

As I was mentally chuckling to myself, Komachi, who’d been thinking and *hmm*ing beside me, opened her mouth. “But even if you borrow their names, they’re gonna turn it down in the end, so they can’t ultimately be candidates, right?”

Just as Komachi said, without the consent of the individuals in question, the applications for candidacy couldn’t be completed. Because of what had happened with Isshiki, I doubted anyone would be able to hand in that form without the candidate’s permission now.

“It’s okay if they don’t,” I explained. “Like, we don’t need them to. I just have to gather nominators.”

“?” Now everyone at the table looked confused, including Komachi still.

“What do you think would happen if every student in the school nominated you?”

“Well, you’d win.” Komachi nodded as if this was completely obvious.

I nodded back at her. “Of course you would. Or rather, the other candidates wouldn’t be able to announce candidacy. Since if you’ve nominated one candidate, you can’t write yourself down for another.”

“Oh, I never imagined there was a rule like that… No man is above the law…,” Zaimokuza marveled.

But it didn’t matter if it was a rule or not. Also, that Seagal movie has nothing to do with it.

“No, I don’t know if that’s written in the protocol or not. Most

students don't even know there is a protocol in the first place. But if you sign for someone, you're not gonna think you're allowed to put your name down for someone else, right?" Since they won't know about the protocol, at times like these, people will make judgments based on common sense.

If you could only make one recommendation, that would create another side to the nomination-gathering stage. It would not only be a simple cut of weak candidates, but also function as a preliminary election. That could be inferred from the expression "at least thirty nominators." That meant you could make it as many above thirty as you wanted.

"So I'll flood the pool with candidates and gather as many nominators as possible," I said.

"If you gather everyone ahead of time, then the others can't announce candidacy, huh?" Taishi looked at me with sparkling eyes, like, *Whoa!*

But sorry, it's not that simple. "Well, if you were only considering this on a basic level, then yes. But that's probably impossible. This is ultimately sort of like buying time. If there are a lot of candidates, then people will worry about who to nominate. So it'll make it harder for them to sign." Though extremely mild, this would have some effect in deterring nominations from the other two. But it was ultimately just a deterrent and couldn't finish the deal.

I needed one more move.

"…Hey," someone said to me as I was thinking about how to draw my cards. Lifting my head, I saw a serious look in Kawasaki's eyes. She was kind of glaring at me, too, but, well, that's her resting face. "Forget whether this'll actually work or not. Won't it be bad for you if it gets found out that you've used these people's names without permission?"

Once the older sister had spoken, the younger brother also nodded and agreed. "That's right; you'll get beat up, Bro. They'll beat you to a pulp."

"Don't call me Bro." *I'll beat you up*, I thought, but Kawasaki beside him was scaring me, so I didn't say that part out loud.

Furthermore, Komachi, sitting beside me, tugged on my sleeve, too. "Bro." The corners of her mouth were turned down as she was making dissatisfied noises. She didn't have to say any more for me to understand. She meant to say, *Don't do the same thing again*.

“I know. I’m not going to just waltz out there.”

Then there would be no point.

It was completely true that it was arrogant in the first place to believe just hating me would move all the students in the school to action. I had to adopt more complete methods—incorporating objectivity, even.

“So then who’ll do it?” Totsuka asked.

I shrugged. “I couldn’t make someone else do something like this.” It wasn’t like I wanted to put someone in the line of fire. I didn’t want someone else to take my position. I mean, it’d be awkward if they were to steal away that spot where I belonged. It was pretty comfortable after all.

“So I’ll have a nonhuman do it,” I said, prompting everyone to look at me like, *What?*

Guess I’ll have to explain it properly… “Zaimokuza.”

“Hey, no, I count as human!” Zaimokuza declared his humanity and waved his hands as if to say, *I absolutely can’t, no, I seriously don’t wanna do it!* His extremely honest reaction made me smile wryly.

“I get that. I was just calling on you. Do you have a Twitter?”

“Pwoff-foff-foff! Ohhh, I have it all, laddie: a main, a sub, a private, a sub-sub, and another sub from when me main were banned. Ye may leave the twitterin’ to me. Me clanspeople call me the Great Computer Adept!”

What’s with that weird laugh and that accent? Also, I think your relatives are making fun of you.

But Zaimokuza having a Twitter would make things faster. As I explained Twitter to the others, I pulled up some random account on my phone to show them. “Twitter is like, well, a type of social networking service—I guess you call it a micro-blog. I don’t really know exactly what you call it, but you write something in under one hundred forty characters. These posts are shown to your followers…basically, your readers. You can reply and have a sort of conversation.”

They could Google the details themselves if they wanted, so I moved on. “The great thing about it is the reach. If a message is retweeted, your content will spread and spread.”

Once my very general explanation was done, it seemed everyone basically understood what Twitter was. As expected of modern youngsters. Well, you hear about it a lot. Like with those

people who practically post wanted posters for themselves, or information leaks, or people not thinking before they post and making themselves the target of an Internet mob. That was how I learned about Twitter, too.

"So what about Twitter?" For Zaimokuza, who was already on it, it had to be a boring explanation. He pushed me to continue.

"We'll create some candidate support accounts on Twitter. But we make them look legit, like real people are running them. And then these fake people will gather nominations online."

"Fake people… Hmm…," Komachi muttered, like maybe she understood, and maybe she didn't.

I nodded at her.

It was the instant version, a Band-Aid, a breaking of the rules for one time.

But I could use this method just this once.

"That's not against the rules?" Komachi gave me a dubious look.

If we were talking about the rules, I was pretty sure it wasn't written in the student council election protocol that you couldn't do your election campaigning online. Well, nobody had even thought of the Internet back when they'd written the protocol.

Plus, this behavior wasn't something the rules would even apply to. "I'm not going to actually submit it, so it doesn't matter."

"I dunno…" Komachi folded her arms and tilted her head.

I clapped my hand lightly on her head and said, "Well, even if it's not allowed, the ones who'll get the complaints and the blame will be those fake people. The unwitting candidates and those who supported them will be victims, while the onus lies on these fictional people. If we do that, everyone maintains their reputations. Nobody'll get hurt."

Someone always gets hurt.

If a world existed where that wasn't true, then it would only mean everyone is hurt equally.

If you know someone has to take the fall to keep the world turning, but you still hate the idea of someone having to fall, then you have no choice but to create a scapegoat. And rather than choosing someone who already exists, you create something that will take the injuries and hate into its body and heart.

This was probably the best card I could play. It would take some work, and it wasn't particularly efficient, but still, I could

honestly say no harm done.

"Whoa, Bro…" Taishi's unvarnished opinion slipped out, a slightly stiff smile on his face.

"Ha-ha-ha, not too much praise, now. Also, don't call me Bro."

This made Kawasaki inform me rather sharply, "I don't think Taishi is complimenting you, though."

Huh? Is that right? So is he freaked out after all?

"B-but it'd be nice if it works out, right?" Totsuka intervened.

Komachi sighed and shot a glare at me. "Well, it's fine if it does work out, but…"

Normally, when I came up with something like this, Komachi would crisply shoot something right back at me, but her reactions had been slower than usual. This bothered me, so I asked her, "Is this idea that bad?"

"Hmm, it's more like…I don't really know…if it's a good thing for you, Bro." Komachi said, anxious. It seemed she couldn't explain it well herself.

Well, I did think it was an underhanded and unfair method.

"But you shall never know if you do not try," Zaimokuza declared. "There is aught else."

He was right. My cards were limited, and what's more, I was drawing a card that fundamentally didn't exist. The duels of the strongest duelists are always fated. A duelist can even create the cards they draw. That's how it is.

"So how will you run them?" Zaimokuza asked. "You can make accounts, but still, gaining followers and retweets is no easy task."

"I'll follow every single kid who goes to this school. Find one, and you should be able to find more from their followers, like in a chain. And…when students are on Twitter together, there's a pressure to follow back. Especially with girls," I said.

Zaimokuza slapped his knee. "Oh-ho, I get the gist of it. You greet them by saying you're from the same school in a reply and then request to be mutuals, eh?"

As expected of the Great Computer Adept. He understands these things oh so well.

When students are interacting on Twitter, real life connections always get brought into it. If someone tells you they're from the same school and follows you, even if they're not a direct acquaintance, it's human nature to think, *I can't* not *follow them back*… And once they followed the account, we'd have them in the

bag, and the tweets made by our fake account would be displayed on their timeline.

"So the usernames and posts will look something like this." Pulling a ballpoint pen out of my bag, I snatched a paper napkin from the table to scribble it out.

Username: Support Account for _____

[Soubu HS only] Make them student council president! We're currently gathering nominators! RT to support and put your name on the #nominatorregister! [OK to spread]

While checking on my phone, I made up a decent enough sample.

"Basically, you post this periodically to get retweets. And then you write the names of all the people who retweeted it on your nominator register."

Besides this, I also had to come up with a profile for the accounts. For this part, there would be difficulty in presenting exactly the right amount of information. I had to ride a fine line: not anyone specific but someone who seemed like they would exist. It'd be a pain to make multiple accounts…

Everyone spent some time inspecting the example I'd written up, as well as some real tweets online. It would be best to have multiple people checking these to make them more accurate. It helped to have extra manpower at times like these.

Eventually, Taishi, who'd been watching this, said "Um!" and raised his hand. "What will you do if the people you're making candidates see this and deny they're running?"

Yeah, it was very possible the people in question would see this… "Hmm…" I mulled over this for a bit before I said, "You know, when you post, you should write, *We're not telling them about this yet! ♪ Tee-hee. ♪* Then you'll be fine to support them without permission."

Following Taishi, Totsuka, who'd been looking at my phone, raised his hand, too. *Go ahead, Totsuka.*

"So the names on here are called usernames, right, Hachiman? It looks like it's not their real names, but is that okay?"

"Yep. If someone uses their real name, we can just write that, or if we can ask to find out, that also works," I said.

Kawasaki gave me a dull look. “Nobody’s gonna tell you their names.”

My, Miss Kawasaki, you have a surprisingly tough guard. I don’t mind kids like that. Because I have a real tough guard, too. Prudence is important.

I’m not stupid enough to tell someone my real name if they ask out of the blue, either. I got that much. “Well, frankly, it doesn’t matter if they’re anonymous. This isn’t an official list of nominators. We’re not going to submit this, and we’re not going to publicize it, either. All it has to do is make them conscious of the person they’re voting for, and if it stops them from nominating any others, then that’s extra lucky.”

“That’s enough?” Komachi asked, surprised.

I nodded. “The real value of this is in how it’ll help us with negotiations.”

“Negotiation…,” Komachi muttered quietly.

Well, maybe I’d put that in a rather formal manner.

That was the real point of these fake accounts. Hedging our bets with people who don’t actually exist and the secret online campaign to hamstring Yukinoshita’s and Yuigahama’s attempts to gather nominators were no more than secondary by-products of that goal. The most important thing was the accomplishment these accounts would assemble.

That accomplishment would become my evidence for convincing Iroha Isshiki, and then Iroha Isshiki would be the key piece in my next step.

By getting opinions from everyone here and having them submit their concerns, I was sure to have eliminated most uncertain elements.

The remaining problem was who would manage the accounts, but…

Well, me and Zaimokuza, I guess. “Zaimokuza, can I ask you to run half the accounts?”

“You can indeed!” Zaimokuza put on a cool, dark smile.

You get pretty confident when it’s your field of specialty, huh?

That show of confidence just scared me instead, though, so I made sure to warn him, “Don’t reveal who you really are. You only have to pull the wool over their eyes for the next three days.”

“Leave it to me. After that one time my attempts to disguise my IP were foiled, I learned much, terrifying though the experience

was."

I didn't know that happened to him… But, well, if he'd had one scary experience, it was unlikely he'd blow it.

I was thinking, *Now we can get started*, when Kawasaki rapped on the table. *What, is that Morse code?* I thought, but it seemed she was calling for me. *Uh, just call me normally. Or do you not remember people's names? You're so mean, Kawa-something!*

"What is it?" I asked.

Kawasaki glanced over at Zaimokuza and said, voice low, "Can he write to make it sound like a girl?"

"It's okay. Zaimokuza is great at stuff like that," I said.

Zaimokuza popped his thumb up and snapped a *ding!* ☆ of a wink. "Aye, leave it to my literary talents!"

"That's not what I mean… Find some random account and either copy their text and replace key words or trace their format. You're good at that sort of thing, right?"

"'Tis what I assumed you meant, *ding, ding!*" Suddenly, he gave me a self-deprecating smile.

Uh, that's a fine talent in its own way, so value it, okay?

But now we were basically finished with the discussion, so I drank my coffee, which had long-since gone cold.

One person at the table, Komachi, had a long face, though.

"What is it, Komachi?" I asked, voice so quiet that only she, sitting beside me, would be able to hear.

She replied so quietly, it was as if her voice might fade away. "I was wondering if this'll really work out."

"It'll work out. I'll do it right, all the way up to the final finishing touches. Leave it to me."

"Okay…," she replied, but she was still looking down.

I put my hand on her drooping head and gave it a couple of pats.

"Make sure you actually talk about it with Yukino and Yui, okay? Promise?" Komachi said, taking my head.

"Yeah, I will. But there's no point in talking when you've got nothing convincing. So I'll do it after we're ready to go."

"You always *sound* logical, but you also skip over tons of stuff, so Komachi's worried…"

"It'll be okay."

I'd manage somehow.

This was a really complicated and annoying way to go about

this, but if it was the only way I'd check all the boxes, then I had to choose this option.

I'd gotten my reason, established the problem, and gained a means.

Now I just had to move it into action.

8

When the time is ripe, **Hachiman Hikigaya** makes his speech.

Late at night, I was on my home computer, checking all the fake accounts we were running. In the three days since the creation of these accounts, I'd been glued to Twitter at almost all hours, pulling strings here and there.

Of course, not every student in school had a Twitter account, and some people weren't interested in the student council elections. There were dead accounts, too, and my tweets were often ignored. At one point, I stopped making much progress with retweets, so I added another Hayama support account.

Thanks to that, though I was far from the 1,200 of the total school population, I'd managed to break through my goal number. Thanks so much for your help, Hayama.

Now I could finally talk with Iroha Isshiki, and then Yukino Yukinoshita and Yui Yuigahama afterward. I'd managed to create enough to negotiate with.

But now, for the finishing touches.

Computer still on, I reached out to my cell phone.

I wonder if I have Zaimokuza's number, I thought as I looked at my contacts list to discover it wasn't there after all.

"Agh…"

Thinking about it now, I must have not registered it because I'd figured I'd never use it anyway. Or had I erased it…? My memories on this were vague.

Oh, he'd be in my call history.

When I realized this, I tried looking at my call history. Most of it was Komachi, but when I scrolled back to around the time of the

cultural festival, I found an unfamiliar number. *Oh yeah, I did call him then…*

This device is basically a multifunctional alarm clock featuring additional phone functionality with call history that never quite disappears, but I should probably give credit where it's due on that point.

I called the number in my history.

He picked up before even one ring was over. "'Tis I."

He was the only person who would answer the phone like that. "Hey, Zaimokuza?"

"Herm, what is your business? I'm playing a game on my phone, so I'd like you to hurry it up."

Oh, that's why he picked up after one ring. And here I was getting freaked out, thinking he had to be constantly waiting for me to call him. Well, I didn't want to take up much of his time. *Let's get this done quickly.*

"Sorry. It's about the Twitter accounts. There's something I wanted to ask you to do."

"Ferm?"

I couldn't really tell if that reply meant yes or no, but I told him what I wanted anyway.

It wasn't anything that difficult. Just a little change in the configuration.

Of course, upon hearing my request, Zaimokuza the Great Computer Adept would not decline. However, his reply to me was a little inarticulate. "Herm, well, such minor configuration changes would be quick to implement, but…"

"Then you handle the accounts you're managing. I'll do it for the ones I'm managing."

"I mind not, but… But is this a good idea, Hachiman?" The consideration for me was unusual, especially coming from Zaimokuza.

Making an effort to speak calmly, I replied, "Is what a good idea?"

"…I would not call this technique praiseworthy… 'Twill bring danger…," Zaimokuza said gravely after a few seconds of silence. For something worded in such silly terms, I felt like I could hear a hidden seriousness in his breathing through my smartphone speaker.

As I was wondering how to answer that, he interrupted my

thoughts, practically yelling, “Oh, but don’t get the wrong idea! I’m not worried about you! I’m afeared I’ll be taken as responsible for this, since I’m carrying it out, and that you might mayhap cut the lizard’s tail here, to boot. I pronounce to you here and now that in that case, I’m prepared to expose you.”

“You’re awful. It’s so refreshing.” I couldn’t help but smile. It was hard to tell with this guy if he was speaking seriously or if he meant this as a roundabout warning. “It’ll be okay. Only we know where these accounts really come from. Even if people wanted to find out who they really are, the people described in these accounts don’t actually exist. So nobody’ll get hurt.”

“I hope so…” He was still doubtful.

But I had some wonderful words to offer him. “Did you know, Zaimokuza? …As long as you don’t make a problem a problem, it won’t be a problem.”

“…I believe you are even more awful, Hachiman.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you. Anyway, just do it.”

“Herm, then you leave me with no choice. I only ask that it shall not be made my fault! Truly!”

“I get it… See you,” I said, and then without waiting for his reply, I hung up. That part at the end sounded kinda like he was shouting for real…

But Zaimokuza’s worries were groundless. No matter which way things rolled, he wouldn’t be taking any blame.

Refreshing the browser, I confirmed that the configuration of the accounts he’d been handling were changed.

Now I just had to print it all out.

Until that finished, I leaned against the sofa, looking up at the ceiling.

X X X

Friday dawned. It was the day of the final battle.

But it wasn’t as if there was going to be a final vote. In fact, the point of that day was to prevent that, to keep a fight from happening. So it would be more accurate to call this a conclusion rather than a final battle.

Though I could only put it in such a cool-sounding way up until

the end of third period. Once fourth started, unsurprisingly, I was getting nervous.

After this, a gamble awaited me.

During fourth period, all I was considering was how to make this more likely to succeed. No, maybe it wasn't quite right to call it *considering*. I was endlessly going over pointless thoughts again and again, as if they were wordplay or logic puzzles, to ease my anxiety.

The passing time was like a bed of needles. All I had on my mind was how many more minutes were left as I glanced at the clock.

Eventually, that ended, too. Class was over, and the instant the bell rang, I left the classroom first. When I did, I didn't forget to bring the plastic file folder I'd prepared the day before.

I was heading to 1-C—Iroha Isshiki's class.

I didn't know her behavioral patterns. I had no clue where she normally was during lunch break, either. That was why the only time I could catch her was at this time, right after class.

I ran through a number of simulations in my head on what I should say to address her, or how I should ask someone to call her for me. *It's okay, I made sure to practice this in front of my bathroom mirror. No problem…probably… I'm kinda uneasy about this…*

But in no time, as I was wrapped up in my worries, I arrived at classroom C.

I stealthily peeked inside the open door. You know, like a real creeper. It must have been unusual for students from other grades to come by, as I could sense people here and there watching me… I had better get this done before I got reported!

Taking a look around, I found Isshiki at the back of the class by the window with some friends, right about to open up her lunch… *Guess I have to get someone to call her for me. It's okay, it's okay, it's okay, I practiced this so much…* Hachiman, you can do it! *(said in the voice of Saika Totsuka). Okay, I can do this.*

There were three boys with glasses near the entrance. I called out to that group. "Um… Excuse me?" I'd been so careful not to sound shrill, my voice wound up coming out weirdly low.

"Y-yeah…?" one of them replied, but the other two looked ready to start whispering about me. Well, that was no surprise.

Don't let it bother you; push through. "Can you call Isshiki for me?"

"Huh…" The boy answered vaguely. He was reluctant, but he

did go call Isshiki for me.

Upon receiving this message, Isshiki's head swiftly jerked in my direction, then immediately, she looked disappointed. *Sorry, it's me.*

She came over to me cheerfully, putting a smile on. "Did you need somethiiing?"

"There's something I want you to help me with concerning the student council election," I said.

Isshiki cringed apologetically. "Ah…so after school wouldn't work? Um, we're having lunch, so…?"

I'd assumed she'd refuse, so I'd already anticipated this answer. Filling my dull eyes with as much willpower as I could, I pushed through with a stern tone. "Nope."

"No, huh…?" She folded her arms for a while and groaned, but eventually, she seemed ready to do what she had to. "All right. Please wait a sec, 'kaaay?" she said, then trotted back to her desk, put away her lunch, and trotted up to me again. "So what are we doing?"

"Could you come with me to the library? I just need a little something done."

"Agh… Fiiine."

For a moment there, she had this really begrudging look…

X X X

The library at lunchtime was completely silent—probably because few people used it around noon in the first place, and the atmosphere there was always bleak at this time of year.

In one corner of this quiet library, I heard a particularly loud sigh.

It was coming from right in front of me. "Agh…" Iroha Isshiki sighed again deeply, as if she was trying to tell me something. And then she looked over at me. "Do I haaaave to do this?"

"Uh, look, though, you don't want to be president, right…? Besides, there's no one else to help, so we've got to plug away at this while we have the time," I said, and Isshiki pouted, puffing her cheeks. *She's so pushy…*

"…I guess? But it's so much work to copy all this down!"

I had requested that she transcribe the list of nominator

retweets we'd gathered using the fake accounts onto the nominator register. It really was a pain…

The simple task of transcribing these names was a boring job. And doing it with her, I felt her pain.

And this meant Isshiki began to place more relative weight on chatting. Or maybe it was a defensive strategy on her part, just talking to get through the awkwardness of being with someone like me. So I doubt she was enjoying talking to me.

Well, it wasn't great that her writing was slowing down, but this wasn't a bad direction to be headed.

"Oh, so, like," she said, "was that girl you were hanging out with before Hayama's girlfriend?"

"I dunno."

"C'mon, you can tell me!"

"Once you're done with this."

"Well, she doesn't seem like much of a problem, so I guess it's fine…"

She's scary, mumbling stuff like that to herself…

She probably wouldn't act like this in front of Hayama. Often, when women show weaknesses to men, it's not because they're looking for anything—they just don't see you as a romantic interest, so they let things slip (I can personally verify this). You might say that still counts as a woman with a heavy guard showing goodwill, but very often she legitimately hates you (I can personally verify this, too).

Isshiki continued to chatter to stem the tide of boredom. "Are you friends with Hayama?"

"No, not at all. That was a coincidence. I accompanied them only because a former classmate asked me to."

"Oh, then come hang out with me. We'll invite Hayama and go together."

"Uh, how about no…" I'm really getting used as a pretext here. You might as well paste me in at the beginning of this book.

But whatever the case, I'd been thinking to broach the subject of Hayama, so this was convenient. From where we were in the conversation, it made it easy to ask, too. "So, uh, do you li… What do you think of Hayama?" Without thinking, I changed it to a vaguer question. I am, of course, the pure maiden Hachiman Hikigaya and a little embarrassed to say the word *like* in romantic contexts.

But my ambiguous manner of speaking must have come off as weird and creepy, as Isshiki's mouth dropped open, and then she panicked into a bow. "Wh-what? Are you hitting on me? I'm sorry, not gonna happen. I like someone else."

She rejected me so naturally. Instantaneous defeat… What is this, Ramenman? We hadn't even fought yet, though…

"I'm not hitting on you… I just wanted to know what you think of him."

"Hmm, I dunnooo…? Personally, I guess I'd say I do."

"Oh, I see, 'kinda like,' huh? Kinda…"

"I think he's kinda nice, and…yeah, I'd like to get my hands—hold hands with him and stuff?"

She was about to say *get my hands on him*… That bitch in fluffy sheep's clothing.

But I'd been able to phrase the question I'd wanted to ask.

Now I could begin negotiations with Iroha Isshiki with confidence.

I'd never quite been able to figure her out, until now—partly because I'd only become acquainted with her recently but also because there's such a great difference in our positions and environments. Most of all, I don't think I'd seen the core elements of her character.

But now, I figured I'd lined up all the pieces—through the conversations I'd had with Isshiki and through the course of my own life.

Iroha Isshiki has a shrewdness about her, the ability to use her immaturity and innocence. This is something my little sister, Komachi Hikigaya, also has. However, Isshiki lacks that core of sweetness and cuteness. So I could liken her to a completely uncute Komachi.

In terms of her social mask and calculated nature, she's Haruno Yukinoshita—but not nearly as skilled. For that reason, I could call her a lesser Haruno.

The fluffy and gentle feel to her is a lot like Meguri, but she's a fundamentally different type of person. Therefore, Iroha Isshiki is a pseudo-Meguri.

Her desire to have people fawning over her might be fairly similar to Sagami, but she seems better at it than Sagami is. This makes Iroha Isshiki like an ultra-intense Sagami.

It's occurred to me that her behavioral principle of creating a

character of herself and attempting to maintain it is close to Kaori Orimoto's behavior. Thus, Iroha Isshiki is a variant type of Orimoto.

Taking the above into consideration, I should be able to derive her tendencies and how she should be dealt with.

She isn't particularly proud, so when flattery is the most effective method, she'll charm who she needs to, and she takes care to ensure she will be loved well into the future. On the other hand, she has no intention of giving herself out freely and is cautious not to hurt her own reputation. Basically, she wants to protect her own brand image.

This is exactly why she didn't want a vote of confidence—because there was a risk the vote of confidence style of election would harm her image. There was nothing she'd hate more than a fight she would obviously win. Running in a contest like that wouldn't make her own stock rise.

This mode of thought may be similar to that of a manager of a conservative, midsize business.

So then we should be able to have a businesslike conversation.

My silence must have made Isshiki bored again, because she was starting to wheedle a little. "Heeeey, Hikigaya, is there really any point to doing this? It's a lot of trouble to write it by hand, too…"

"Well, you're not wrong…"

"You're being kinda vague here…" She shot an annoyed expression at me.

"Whether you do it or not, Yukinoshita or Yuigahama will win. So in that sense, it is pointless… You can't beat them, no matter what you do."

"Huh, that's kinda mean. Well, I don't feel like I have to win, though…," Isshiki commented with a smile, as if warding off a joke.

With incredible seriousness and complete earnestness, I replied, "Don't worry. You won't. I promise you that."

Her eyebrow twitched for a second. "Y-yeah, for sure. So, like, if I did actually win, it'd be weird, huh?"

I nodded and continued dispassionately. "Hayama's doing Yukinoshita's campaign speech after all."

"Ohhh yeah, that's right, huh?"

"And Yuigahama has Miura with her."

"Yeah, Miura…"

It was helpful that she reacted to that name. I was aware there

was some bad blood between Isshiki and Miura. Hoping to kindle that, I kept talking. “Besides, Yuigahama is both Hayama’s classmate and his friend, and Hayama and Yukinoshita have known each other since they were kids.”

“Yeah…? Wait, really? That long?” Isshiki clearly must not have known about Hayama and Yukinoshita’s relationship, as her last question came out more intense than before.

“I think it’s obvious if you just look at them, but that’s the kind of people they are. Invincible in every way.”

“Agh, well…” Isshiki uttered a sound somewhere between a sigh and a moan.

If I were to offer my extremely personal opinion…

I’m sure there are no girls in this school more amazing than those two—probably no matter where else you looked.

Noticing that Isshiki was gradually speaking less and less, I pressed her further. “Besides, even the ones who recommended you probably won’t actually vote for you.”

“Agh…”

“I’m sure they’re laughing it up now. Then they’ll see you lose and laugh some more.”

“…” This time she didn’t reply.

But I kept talking. “Pretty aggravating, huh?”

There was the sound of a mechanical pencil lead snapping. That was the only sound in the room, and it made my voice sound particularly loud.

“They think they’re allowed to trash-talk you because you’re a little conspicuous. They’re fooling around, they tell themselves. It’s a joke; they’re just teasing.”

Isshiki’s hand was no longer moving. Her eyes were on the mechanical pencil in her hand.

“You’ve got to give as hard as you get, after all…”

“…Agh, well, it’d be nice if I could do it,” she muttered.

I fired back at her with honesty. “You can.”

Isshiki’s shoulders twitched. Noticing this, I deliberately spoke slowly. “They’ve pulled this sneaky crap on you to show their contempt for you and hurt you. So then you should turn it back on them and get the best results out of the situation they created.”

If, just possibly— If, to a girl, half the girls were her enemies, if Iroha Isshiki really did like Hayato Hayama…

…then I had no choice but to bet on that. I had to bet on Iroha

Isshiki's pride as a girl.

"Yukinoshita has Hayama's support, and Yuigahama has Miura's support. Don't you want to try beating those two?"

Those words made Isshiki lift her head.

But then she immediately put on a shallow business smile. "But I can't win, can I? And if I did, I'd have so many other problems to deal with?"

I think Iroha Isshiki is a fairly smart girl. She has a proper understanding of her own value and acts in a way that's desired of her. But she's also cunning enough to use that attitude only when it's useful to her.

And because she's smart, she would understand exactly how far Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were above her. So I had to eliminate that restraint, or Isshiki wouldn't challenge them.

"Just what do you think I've been having you write?" I asked her.

"It's the nominator register, right?"

"That's right…but this is *your* nominator register."

"What the—? Uh, wait… Huuuh?"

You don't have to correct yourself to sound cuter (and I say this out of the goodness of my heart).

I pulled a different stack of paper, not the list, out of my plastic file folder. These were printouts of all the retweets on Iroha Isshiki's support account. I laid them out one by one in front of her.

"Um, but I already got all my nominations…"

"The range for nominators is thirty or more. You can gather as many as you like."

Isshiki took the printouts in hand, examining them carefully.

I added, "A little over four hundred. That's how many supporters you have."

"…"

Had she done the math to understand what that number meant?

Eventually, she figured it out and jerked her hand away from the papers. "Th-this is too sudden; I can't! I—I mean, I haven't even been thinking about a speech or anything like that!"

"Do you still have the paper with the election promises Yukinoshita talked about?" I said suddenly.

Though confused, Isshiki replied, "Huh? Ah, probably."

"Good, let's go with that."

This made Isshiki fall into thought. "Hmm… Then wouldn't that

make me a puppet?"

"Not at all," I said.

Isshiki tilted her head, question marks in her expression.

I smirked a little. "It's not like you're actually going to follow through with it. You don't call someone who doesn't do as they're told a *puppet*. Nobody keeps their election promises anyway, and nobody is expecting you to, either."

"Isn't that worse than being a puppet?" Isshiki asked, exasperated. But that annoyed smile quickly faded, too. "…But, like, even if I did become president, I don't think I could do it in the end, you knooow? Like, I just don't really have much confidence. And I have my club…"

Of course Isshiki would feel uneasy.

If she threw caution to the wind and chose to become student council president now, clumsiness and failure later on would hurt her brand image. Right now, risk and return lay in the balance, and the scales were wavering.

I had to transform that risk, that drawback, into something advantageous to her. "Well, it's true that it'd be hard to do both at once. But there's a lot to gain from doing it, too. What do you think that is?"

"What? …Well, experience, and goodwill from teachers, I guess? And heeey, you sound like a teacher." Isshiki gave me a dull look, relentlessly communicating what she was thinking: *If this is just a boring lecture, I don't need it.*

But I couldn't have her underestimating me. "…No, that's not it. What you'll gain is an image. 'It's so hard to be student council president as a first-year, but I'm trying so hard and going to club activities, too! I'm so brave!'" I tried to say it as cutely and Isshiki-like as I could.

But she just quietly muttered, "Whoa…"

Oh, it's no good 'cause it's like one of those overly long titles, huh?

But I cleared my throat and continued, and Isshiki did react better to what I said next. "If you're a first-year, people don't mind as much when you screw up, even though ability-wise, there isn't much difference between first- and second-years," I said.

Isshiki looked at me with surprise, and when our eyes met, I gave her one more push. "What's more, if you're doing both, when things are a drag with student council, you can use your club as an excuse, and the reverse is true, too… These two things will be an

advantage available only to you.”

“B-but, like…it’s still gonna be haaard, right?” Isshiki was fidgeting her shoulders. This was the most positive reaction thus far.

Like Isshiki said, if she were to become president now, she’d be a puppet—no, even less than that. She wouldn’t be able to do anything on her own. But that was exactly what might make her fitting as president. Needing help and protection and having a lot of people, including Hayama, doting on her was her greatest virtue and merit.

Simply put: “Times like that, you should just talk to Hayama. If you’d like, have him help you. He’ll be with you the whole year. If you go out to eat after club to talk to him, he might even walk you home after that,” I said, all in one breath.

Isshiki blinked. “…Are you actually smart?”

“I guess.” And being a malicious jerk was the price.

Isshiki let out a sigh with a smile that could have been sincere or sarcastic. “Well…if I have all this support, I don’t have a choice, do I? That proposal is fairly attractive… And besides, I don’t want the class laughing at me behind my back…”

She punctuated her response there and then revealed an exceptionally mean smile. “So I’ll let you trick me into this.”

Strangely enough…

…I found myself thinking this smile was cuter.

X X X

I slowly walked through the hallway of the special-use building. Though it had only been a few days, seeing it felt particularly nostalgic.

The post-school bustle, the commotion of the students, the calls from clubs coming from outside, and the brass band that could be heard from a distance all felt nostalgic.

I stood before the clubroom and put my hand on the door. It wasn’t locked. It seemed they were already here. I blew out a little breath and entered the clubroom.

The faint smell of black tea hung in the air.

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama sat in their usual seats, but they

weren't talking.

Yukinoshita would normally have been reading a book, but that day she was sitting up straight in silence. Yuigahama, beside her, wasn't on her phone. She glanced over at Yukinoshita, looking uncomfortable.

Understandable.

There were already rumors spreading that Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were going to run in the election for president. I'd had my eye on Twitter, and people there had been talking about it.

Of course, Yukinoshita would also be aware that Yuigahama was going to announce candidacy. That was why Yuigahama must have been worried about what Yukinoshita would say.

But that would end, too, right here and now.

"Sorry to make you wait," I addressed them before pulling out a chair to sit in my usual seat.

Yukinoshita looked at me, then opened her mouth, which until now had been pulled in a tight line. "It's unusual for you to expressly call us here."

"Oh, I figured we'd come up with our final decision," I said.

Yukinoshita seemed a little surprised, and then her gaze slid down. As if considering, she repeated slowly, "Our final decision…?"

"Yeah." I looked over at Yuigahama, who was silent, looking at me. She was waiting for me to speak.

Even if our methods were different, it would be best to come to a conclusion as a club—with the matter of a one-time item like this, especially so.

The student council election was a one-time deal. There could be no trial and error. This opportunity existed only at this time, in this moment. Since we couldn't test things out multiple times, it would best to work out a common policy in the end.

"You haven't changed your minds?" I confirmed one last time, though I knew how they would answer.

Yukinoshita gave me a hard expression. Without the sharpness in her eyes softening even slightly, she immediately declared, "No. This plan is the best one."

Her tone was firm at its core, piercing through me like a physical strike.

The forceful pressure of it made me hesitate. The clubroom went dead silent.

And then came the quietest whisper. But its stillness meant it made that much more of an impression. “…I…haven’t changed my mind, either.” Yuigahama didn’t look at us at all, silently staring at her desk.

In the presence of the serious aura Yuigahama emitted, Yukinoshita bit her lip. “Yuigahama, there’s no reason for you to run…”

“I’m going to. And I’ll win.” Her quiet voice was stubborn, and there was no sense she would give in. I couldn’t read her expression; her face was still directed at the floor.

In a weak, quiet voice, her narrowed eyes lonely as if she was witnessing something heartbreaking, something sorrowful, Yukinoshita questioned Yuigahama’s drooping profile. “Why you, too…?”

“…Because if you go, Yukinon, the club’ll disappear… I don’t want that,” Yuigahama replied, voice trembling.

Yukinoshita slowly assembled an admonishment. “I said before —that won’t happen. So there’s no need for you to run, too.”

“But…!” Yuigahama raised her face to protest, but staring at Yukinoshita made her lose the rest of what she was going to say.

I picked up after that. “You don’t actually have to run in the election, Yuigahama… Or you, Yukinoshita.”

“What do you mean?” Yukinoshita asked, giving me an accusatory look. Her eyes were sharply narrowed. “I believe I rejected your plan.”

Yes, she’d rejected it thoroughly, saying that my belief that I could make things work out on my own somehow was completely arrogant. And then Hayama had taught me just how people will see me, and how they will force their own arbitrary opinions on me, no matter what my expectations are… Well, someone else helped me realize it might be more than that.

“…Yeah, that’s why that isn’t my plan. I’ve…dropped that sort of thing.” It really would be different from my methods thus far. I’d spent more time taking the time to hedge my risks. I had cleared the conditions levied on me.

“…” Yukinoshita went silent, as if she was a little bewildered. She seemed surprised I’d backed down so easily.

“Then…why don’t we have to run?” Yuigahama asked timidly, worried about what I might say.

But my answer was incredibly normal. It wasn’t anything much.

“Isshiki wants to be student council president now. So the request itself doesn’t exist anymore,” I said.

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were both dumbstruck.

Yukinoshita said doubtfully, “Why all of a sudden…?”

“It’s less that it’s sudden and more like our original assumptions were wrong.”

Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and I had all been approaching this the wrong way.

If she wasn’t into it, letting her quit without a fuss was one way of doing it. But there was one more way—and that was to get her into it. To cancel out the problem itself.

“It wasn’t like Isshiki didn’t want to be president. She just didn’t want to lose the vote of confidence, or to get elected through a method by which she would inevitably win—like the vote of confidence—and end up looking bad as student council president.”

There was someone here who wasn’t going to listen to others and was mentally writing their own success story—and that person wouldn’t be satisfied unless things went according to their script.

There was also someone here who had created a precise character and meant to maintain that.

Isshiki simply didn’t want to do anything disadvantageous to herself, anything that would cause her value to drop. So all I had to do was eliminate those drawbacks while presenting some advantages.

“That’s why if you clear all those conditions, then she’ll become student council president.”

Listening to me talk, though confused, Yuigahama voiced her doubt. “B-but if we don’t run, then won’t it end up being a vote of confidence, in the end?”

“Yeah, it will. But you have to make sure the vote of confidence is valuable to her. If it doesn’t damage Iroha Isshiki’s brand image, then that’s something else.”

I could tell by the questioning looks in their eyes that they were unconvinced.

But rather than explaining verbally, it would be faster to offer a concrete example. I grabbed my bag. “So I looked for that value.” And then I pulled out the plastic file folder.

The papers inside were the same ones I’d shown to Isshiki—a catalog of the support accounts run by the fictitious people, as well as the people who’d retweeted from those accounts, printed out and

made into a list.

"What is this?" Yuigahama asked me, taking one of the papers in hand.

"There were these support accounts running on Twitter. Well, it seems there were accounts for other people, too, and not only the ones for Isshiki I have here." I was impressed with myself that I had the nerve to speak about this so carelessly when I'd been the one running them all myself. But none of what I'd said was a lie.

Yukinoshita gazed at the printouts and, with some confusion, muttered, "Gathering nominators on the Internet…"

"Not only that. Of all the different accounts, Isshiki's got the most retweets."

"In other words, that would functionally make this a preliminary election…," Yukinoshita murmured.

I nodded back at her.

Even though it had been on Twitter, the fact of her victory would become a rumor that would spread. There had been other candidates, too, but I just had to ensure they'd feel the effects of this functional preliminary election and feel like they'd seen her run for student council president. Even if it didn't go all that well, it only had to fulfill Isshiki's sense of self-importance and become reason for her to act.

Yukinoshita looked at the first sheet, then the second, also skimming over the list. Then she breathed a deep sigh. "I see; this is what you were doing… So that was why nobody jumped on board when I talked to them about recommending me…"

I doubt the people Yukinoshita had spoken with were necessarily the same people who had retweeted these posts. But all this nominator gathering on Twitter would have given them space to think about it. And offering multiple choices would cause them to hesitate.

Even if the time each individual hesitated was brief, if that tendency spread, it would cause even greater loss of time. You could say it's similar to the theory that traffic jams are originally caused by one car at the front suddenly hitting the brakes.

There was the rustle of paper.

Pointing to the printout in front of me, Yukinoshita asked me a question. Her tight grip on it creased the paper. "…Did you do this?"

"These people did it themselves. I don't know who they are."

“…I see.”

She didn’t press me any further.

She probably realized it was useless. I wasn’t going to talk, and even if she wanted to find out, you couldn’t identify any individuals based on the information displayed on those accounts.

“This is a lot,” Yuigahama muttered, looking stunned.

“Right? About four hundred or so,” I replied, also looking at the *Iroha Isshiki support account* printout.

Between Hayama, Miura, Ebina, Isshiki, Totsuka, Sagami, Tobe, and the second Hayama support account I’d added after, the cumulative total number of retweets for all the periodic posts of the eight accounts added together was over four hundred. Hayama was the greatest among them. If you averaged out all the tweets, one tweet probably would not have even twenty retweets. The number had come from the repetition across multiple accounts.

Yes, making use of all these accounts made the number four hundred.

So Isshiki hadn’t gathered that number alone.

The number of Twitter users in Soubu High School was limited, so it would have been impossible for Iroha Isshiki to gather that much support in the first place.

So there was just one lie here.

Twitter has usernames in English letters, plus a Japanese account name, and that can be changed. The Japanese account names and the thumbnail images of all eight accounts we were currently running had been changed the night before to *Iroha Isshiki support account*.

Those people behind the accounts, who were unknown to anyone, who may or may not actually exist, had changed them.

If you examined these closely, you would immediately discover that the English usernames were different. But those strings of English letters were composed of words like *president* and *support* and had nothing to connect them to any individual. So you could make as many excuses as you wanted.

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were examining the printouts.

If you actually looked closely, you’d find some of the accounts listed were duplicates, and of course, there were a lot of anonymous ones, too.

It was a bluff.

But if it could get me through this day, this moment, it would

be enough.

Yuigahama put the printout she held on the desk and quietly reached for her cell phone. The gesture made me break out in a sudden cold sweat. Was she going to check online?

But her hand stopped there. She seemed to abandon the idea, touching her phone before she slid her hand away again.

The account names were still, in fact, as I had changed them. That was why even if she did confirm on the spot, it should show the same thing as these printouts.

As long as the fake accounts had followers, this was a risky method.

But because of the way Twitter works, if you're not posting, your account's tweets won't be displayed at the top of your followers' timelines. Since I hadn't made any tweets that day, the name change of the fake accounts would be unlikely to be seen by the followers. And the followers' timelines were always being updated, new posts piling up one after another. This would chase the tweets of these fake accounts down and down until they were hidden.

Of course, some followers might notice that the current display names were different. But if I could pull the wool over their eyes for just this one day, after that, I would delete everything, accounts and all. Everything would disappear.

There were two reasons for the existence of these fake accounts.

The first was as evidence to make Iroha Isshiki interested in being president.

Secondly, as a deterrence to Yukinoshita. It simply had to buy time, make her spend more resources to gather all her nominators, while also functioning as data indicating the possibility of Isshiki getting elected. And if I could stop Yukinoshita, then Yuigahama would also lose her motivation for announcing candidacy.

"I see… There are over four hundred, aren't there…?" Yukinoshita muttered upon seeing the list.

The total population of the school was 1,200. In other words, if there were three candidates, then via simple math, you would need more than four hundred votes to get elected. Based on that, Iroha Isshiki stood a chance.

This was enough of an explanation. I gathered up the printouts, lining them up evenly on the desk, then put them in my bag.

"Nothing's preventing Isshiki from becoming president now.

So…” I looked at the two girls and said slowly, “There’s no need for either of you to be president anymore.”

It had taken me quite a long time to get to this one trivial line. But this was my conclusion. Nobody would be hurt, nobody would be accused of wrongdoing, nobody would be blamed. The responsibility and the injury would disappear along with the account data.

Yuigahama breathed a sigh. “What a relief… Then it’s resolved…” Her shoulders relaxed, as if freed from her fatigue, and finally, she smiled.

I relieved the tension in my own shoulders, rotating my neck.

Then my eyes focused on…a single person.

Yukino Yukinoshita was silent.

Quiet, without making a single sound, like a well-made porcelain doll. Her eyes were translucent like glass or gemstones, and so cold.

This should have been the Yukinoshita I knew: collected, quiet, calm, and refined, with conventionally beautiful looks.

But now there was a fragility there, like if you were to touch her, she would disappear.

“…I see,” she said with a sigh, raising her head. But she wasn’t looking at me or Yuigahama. “Then…the problem…and the reason for me to do anything…is gone, isn’t it…?” She looked far away, out the window.

“Yeah, that’s what it means…” I followed her gaze but saw only the same scenery as ever. The setting sun, the clear void of the sky. But the barren trees were swaying sadly.

“…Yes,” Yukinoshita replied briefly, then gently lowered her face and closed her eyes as if sleeping.

“You thought you had everything figured out, didn’t you…?”

Yukinoshita’s remark wasn’t directed at anyone. That gave it an empty ring, somehow.

Those words stirred my heart.

But she spoke as if expressing nostalgia for a distant past, as if mourning something that had ended, forbidding me from questioning it.

Yukinoshita quietly got to her feet. “—I’ll report to Miss

Hiratsuka and Meguri.”

“W-we’ll come, too.” Yuigahama’s chair scraped as she stood.

But Yukinoshita stopped her with a calm smile. “I’ll be fine on my own… If my explanation goes on long and I’m late coming back, you can leave without me. I’ll return the key,” she said and left the clubroom.

Her attitude, and her smile at Yuigahama, shouldn’t have been any different from usual.

So then why was it that I was trying to find differences in it?

There was another stirring of unease in my heart. Yukinoshita’s remark wouldn’t leave my ears.

Then, for the first time, I figured it out.

What if, for argument’s sake…her real motive in running was something else?

I remembered too late.

Yukinoshita had known the details of the election protocol. I’d assumed that was a manifestation of her knowledgeability, her intelligence.

Yukinoshita had said she didn’t mind doing it. I’d assumed that, like with the cultural festival, this was a manifestation of her antagonism toward her sister, and her tendency to focus on one thing.

But what if…?

What if that had been what she really wanted?

What if I’d been averting my eyes from her true intentions, hiding there among all the things she’d said?

What if I’d interpreted the principles governing her conduct to my personal convenience and acted based on hopeful speculation?

Some people can’t do anything unless they’re given a problem, unless they can find motivation to act.

Some people will still feel conflicted, certain yet uncertain, and the uncertainty will prevent them from action.

I understood that well. So then it wouldn’t be surprising for other people to be like that, too.

But in my mind, I had excluded Yukinoshita from that possibility.

I didn’t know what it was, actually.

It’s not as if we’d talked about it. Even if we had, I wouldn’t get it.

Just…

All that remained was doubt—wondering if I had made some mistake.

X X X

The setting sun was streaming into the clubroom.

We waited for Yukinoshita, but it seemed her explanation was taking a while, just as she'd said it might. Though I didn't know if that was true.

Only Yuigahama and I were in the clubroom now.

A book I wasn't reading lay open in front of me, while Yuigahama was staring at her cell phone, fingers not moving.

I glanced over at the clock on the wall. It was about time to go home.

When my eyes returned from the clock, they met with Yuigahama's. She'd been looking at the clock, too. She opened her mouth. "Yukinon's late, huh…?"

"…Yeah." With that short answer, I dropped my gaze to the book in my hands again. But I realized it was pointless, and I closed the book.

I struggled to decide what to say. I scratched my head, then began. "…Um, sorry."

"…Huh? Wh-why are you apologizing?" Startled, Yuigahama stiffened a little.

"Oh, I mean, you put a lot of work into that stuff, right? I mean, like your campaign promises and writing your speech and stuff."

"Oh, that…" Understanding, Yuigahama relaxed. "It's okay now." And then she smiled, her expression relieved.

That was a bit of a weight off my chest. Her popularity and personality aside, she wasn't all that suited for the practical aspects of the role, but I thought she'd worked really hard. So I felt kind of bad for squashing her efforts. I breathed a little sigh.

"You put a lot of work into stuff, too, didn't you, Hikki? Look, you haven't gotten your hair cut, and it's so scruffy," Yuigahama said, pointing to my head. Then she suddenly stood. "I'll fix it."

"I'm fine."

Yuigahama ignored my refusal, saying, "Now, now," as she circled around behind me. Her warm hands gently stroked my hair.

I tried dodging them by shaking my head, but she held it in place. “You worked hard, too, huh, Hikki?”

“Not really…”

As we talked, at some point, her hands touching my hair stopped moving, and the back of my head was enveloped in a pressure like a kind embrace. Startled, I tensed up. If I were to move now, I’d increase the area of contact too much. That would be very uncomfortable.

Unable to even twitch, I heard a soft voice in my ear. “This place is important to me, and you kept it safe.”

Her words were horribly kind, and so I closed my eyes. The faint warmth I felt coming gradually from her made me want to listen carefully.

Yuigahama let out a small breath, then slowly began to put the words together. “Listen… I actually did understand…that I probably couldn’t beat Yukinon and that even if I did win and become president, I wouldn’t be able to come to club anymore.” She spoke hesitantly, without any embellishment. That was why I listened in silence.

She continued. “So…it’s all thanks to you, Hikki.”

But no matter how kind her words were, I couldn’t accept them. “…No.”

I don’t think I’d been trying to do anything. I hadn’t even known what I should do. Someone else had made me realize that. The kind words should be directed at *her* after all.

“Stop messing with my hair.” I brushed her hands away as gently as possible. She stood behind me for a while but then cracked a little smile, pulled up a chair beside me, and sat.

I couldn’t look her in the face. I looked off in some other direction.

Suddenly, she opened her mouth. “You did everything you could!”

“What’s this, all of a sudden?”

She was talking so loud, even though she was beside me. When I turned back to her reflexively, she nodded and said again, loudly, “You did everything you could!”

“Stop it. I didn’t do anything.” All I’d actually done was clack away on Twitter and talk with Isshiki. I hadn’t done anything productive. In fact, I think I’d actually hurt some people’s chances of being productive.

Maybe those feelings of remorse came out a little in my voice. Yuigahama nodded weakly, a wavering smile on her face. “…Yeah, you didn’t do anything that we could see, huh?”

I replied with just a nod. But that made Yuigahama shake her head a little. “But I think if we had seen, we’d find you were doing some pretty awful stuff. I think the way you do things probably isn’t something you can change simply because you want to.”

It was as if she understood what I’d done. Or maybe she’d known about the existence of those accounts. Whatever the case, I knew it wasn’t anything praiseworthy. In fact, you could say hiding it made it even worse.

But if nobody saw it and nobody knew about it, then there was no problem.

"If you haven't seen it, then you don't even know if I did anything."

That's why we should put an end to this now. We should bury it.

That was what I'd meant to say.

But Yuigahama's eyes never left me, and she continued to speak. "But even if nobody can see it and nobody blames you, I was thinking it might bother you, Hikki."

"No, it—"

"…Guilt doesn't just go away," she cut me off to say.

Oh, she's right. It really won't disappear.

I'm sure I'll always be wrong about something and live with that sort of insecurity.

So no matter what I do, guilt will follow me around.

"I…couldn't do anything, but…I still find myself thinking, *I guess this is for the best*. So I wonder if it's worse for you," she said kindly. She was smiling a little sadly. But she was still trying to be considerate to me.

That was why her kindness hurt so much. Even though she didn't want to hurt me. Even something that simple wouldn't go right.

"…We're…not wrong, are we?" she asked me.

I couldn't answer that question. Even though I already knew the answer.

When I said nothing, Yuigahama continued, tone fervent. "Now things'll go back to normal, right?"

"…I don't know," I said honestly.

What Yukinoshita had said still wouldn't leave me.

The illusion of being understood is utterly indulgent and complacent. Once you step into that morass, you can't get out. It's so much easier to just cling to it—so comfortable.

That delusion of understanding each other is a harsh form of make-believe.

I don't even know what kind of despair it would bring to awaken from that delusion.

The smallest sense of unease or suspicion would start to bite and turn to a bad aftertaste, and eventually, it would all come to nothing.

I should have realized—what I wanted was not some pretense

of friendship.

I think I wanted something real, and I didn't need anything else.

Communicating without a word, understanding without any action, and no matter what happens, it won't break.

A foolish but beautiful illusion far removed from reality.

She and I both sought something real like that.

9

The room no longer **smells of tea**.

Though we were not yet through with December, that end-of-year atmosphere was gradually encroaching on the day-to-day, and it felt like even the flow of time was being rushed along.

There were only about three weeks left in the year.

The midwinter feeling began hanging around at the beginning of the month as the Soubu High School student council election was held to no particular excitement though quite a bit later than most years. The ballot had been solemnly carried out the day before.

Isshiki had tearfully begged Hayama to do her campaign speech and had dealt with the issue by stealing the entirety of Yukinoshita's election promises. And then the result of the ballot count on the day of was that Iroha Isshiki was entrusted with the position of student council president.

A new student council would begin that day.

But most students had nothing to do with this, so they all spent their day as usual.

I was the same. I was living the same lifestyle I always had.

I took the same classes as always; before I knew it, school was already over.

Homeroom ended, and I left the classroom.

The season had completely turned to late fall, and the sky beyond the hallway windows was overcast and cold looking.

I went down the stairs and turned the corner in the hall. Being that they were starting up that day, the student council room ahead was busy with people going in and out.

When Isshiki saw me walk down the hallway, she put on a fluffy smile and did a tiny wave with her hand in front of her chest. I nodded lightly in reply to her greeting and hurried on ahead.

"Heeeeeey!" Then she called out in a cutesy, saccharine voice.

This is, you know, that thing where I think it's me and turn back to find out it wasn't me, it was someone else. Or so I thought, ignoring

her. But as I started walking, I heard the patter of footsteps behind me. I turned around to see Isshiki had followed me.

She pouted her lips with her cheeks puffed up. “Why did you ignore me?”

“Uh, I figured you meant someone else… Already starting work today?” I asked.

She puffed out her chest with a bit of pride. “That’s right! … Well, I don’t think I’ll get anything done at first, though.” Her expression started off confident, but as she approached the end of her sentence, she lost momentum.

Well, she’d basically drifted into the position of student council president. Of course she’d be anxious about it, and she’d mess up a lot.

But the mistakes she was going to make from now on, she would surely be able to fix. She could take them back. So there was no need for her to be nervous over it. Feeling a little envious about that, I smiled in spite of myself. “Well, none of the students expect much from the student council anyway, so you can just take it easy, right?”

“Why do you have to put it like that…?” Isshiki grumbled, unamused.

But it wasn’t like I was expecting anything from her, myself. *Well, I could give her some encouragement appropriate to this new beginning, I guess…*

“Next year, my sister is gonna be attending this school.”

“Huh? Uh, but entrance exams aren’t even over yet,” Isshiki said, waving her hands with a look on her face like, *What’s this guy talking about?*

Shut up. In my head, Komachi passing is a foregone conclusion.

“So make it a good school for her.”

“…” Isshiki’s mouth hung open. And then, without any blushing coquettishness or shyness, her voice consistently gentle, she pushed both her hands in front of her as if returning every word I’d said. “What’s that supposed to mean? Are you hitting on me? Sorry, you’re trying way too hard, and it’s creepy, not happening.”

…Those reasons for rejecting me are different from last time, aren’t they?

“You’re better when you’re acting like yourself… I think Hayama likes that sort of thing better, too.”

“Huh, seriously? Where’d you get that intel?” Isshiki jumped on

that, eyes sparkling.

It's not intel that I got from somewhere. It's just that the personality you put on is so eh *that this is comparatively better.* But explaining all that felt like a pain in the ass, so I decided to blow her off and leave. "I just get that impression. Well, good luck on everything."

"Okaaay! Wait—no! We're right in the middle of rearranging the student council room. Won't you come with me?"

Rearranging… Would you rearrange a student council room…?

She grabbed my sleeve, tugging on it. *Guess… Guess she plans to make me help, huh…?* Well, it wasn't like I had any urgent business. Since I was the one who'd pushed her into being student council president, I figured I could help her a little.

So I accompanied her to the student council room, and when we reached the door, a voice came out from inside. "Irohasuuu! What do I do with this? …Irohasuuu?"

That voice sounded familiar… Strangely, when I peeked in, I found Tobe there.

At a time when it was cold as all hell out, he was inexplicably wearing a T-shirt, with a towel around his head. You often see guys like this working at ramen shops, huh…? He was carrying a heavy-looking, smallish box in both hands as he kept calling out to Isshiki. Wondering what it was, I looked closely to see it was a fridge…

"Isshiki, is that okay?" I turned back to her to ask.

She responded cutely and gleefully, "Well, this is going to be my room, starting today. Wouldn't you want to set it up how you want it?"

"Oh, I see…" What I had wanted to ask was not *Is it okay for you to be bringing in a fridge?* but *Is it okay to leave Tobe alone?* … He'd been calling for her all this time…

"Irohasuuu? Where do I put the heater?" I heard Tobe calling out again. I took another peek in to see this time, he was holding a halogen heater.

"Isshiki, is that okay?" I asked Isshiki one more time.

She squeezed her hands like she was warming them. "I get cold easily, you know?"

"Oh, I see…" *I don't care about that… I was asking about Tobe… But oh well. It's just Tobe anyway.*

But anyway, was this president going to be okay…? Though it was rather late to be asking that now, I was uneasy.

"Irohasuuu?" It seemed Tobe couldn't take it anymore, as he

poked his face out. “Huh? You’re helping, too, Hikitani?”

“No…just passing through.”

“For real? Man, if Hayato doesn’t come soon, we’re gonna be in real trouble, seriously.”

Isshiki cut into our mostly empty conversation. “Oh, Tobe. The fridge doesn’t go there. To the back. And the halogen heater goes beside the table.”

“O-okay… I wish you’d told me that first…” Tobe’s face twitched a little.

But when Isshiki smiled brightly and said, “Please and thank you,” he dejectedly returned to his task. Isshiki watched him go off, then turned back to me to say, as if she’d only remembered it a second ago, “Oh, you help, too, please!”

“Uh…”

Despite her request, the student council room wasn’t all that big. Too many people being in there would just get in the way. If she needed help, there was Tobe, and he’d be enough. There were some people around who looked like new council members, too, so it was fine for me to go, right?

Then I saw someone familiar among them.

Meguri was straining with a heavy-looking cardboard box. When she noticed me, she smiled pleasantly and tried to wave, then realized her hands were full and panicked.

…*Well, I’ve got no urgent business.* “…For a bit.”

“Really? Thanks so much.”

I let Isshiki’s remark go in one ear and out the other and entered the student council room. I moved to support Meguri’s box, which was losing its balance right in front of me and looked close to falling. “I’ll carry this.”

“Huh? Th-th-thank you.”

Meguri instructed me to carry the box to the exit. Once we were out in the hallway, I put it down with a *hup* and took a breath.

“Ah-ha-ha, sorry, Hikigaya.”

“No, I’m here to help,” I said briefly, trying to look cool. It was really heavy, though…

A tired ache remained in my hands. When I looked at my palms, Meguri gave a little embarrassed smile. “Ah, there were more personal effects in there than I’d expected. Once I put it all together, it ended up being a lot.”

“These are your personal belongings…?”

I had some slight interest in Meguri's personal belongings. When you hear *a girl's personal belongings* (or even better, *a girl's private things*), doesn't it get your heart pounding a little? It doesn't? Well, my heart rate was speeding up a bit, but of course, there was no way Meguri's heart would be pounding. In fact, she seemed kind of somber.

"It kind of feels like a whole new room…," she murmured to herself.

Meguri had been in office for one year, and she'd spent that year here. And that day, it was being vacated for Isshiki. Of course, she'd probably continue to come here for a while, but even so, this space where she'd worked had already become something else. There were different people bustling around inside, too.

Meguri watched this from a distance with a smile. "…To be honest, I was hoping…"

I didn't ask, *For what?* At her usual easygoing pace, Meguri slowly put the words together.

"…for Yukinoshita to be student council president. And then for Yuigahama to be vice president, too. And then…you could handle miscellaneous duties!"

"Why would I be miscellaneous…?" *I'm the only one without a post?*

Meguri laughed as if I'd said something funny, then continued. "Then after graduation, I'd pop by the student council room sometimes to hang out…and we could talk about things…like, oh, remember how fun the cultural festival and the athletic festival was?" And then my elder said with the innocent smile of a younger girl, "…I sort of wanted that to happen."

Would that have been possible?

I'm sure it would have been.

But that dream ended here, its potential unfulfilled.

There are no take-backs. All you're ever allowed are do-overs—and occasionally, not even that.

Meguri touched the door of the student council room tenderly.

And then with a burst of energy, she lifted her chin. "I have to work hard at training Isshiki! Yeah, I'll do my best!"

"…See you, then."

"Yeah…"

I walked out the door and turned back. Then I bowed. "Thanks for your hard work."

"…Thank you. Thank you for all your efforts, too, Hikigaya!"

With her kind voice at my back, I left the student council room.

X X X

After leaving the student council room, I walked down the hall heading to the special-use building.

That day—the day I'd confirmed Yukinoshita and Yuigahama weren't going to run in the election—it had been a week since then. The two of us had waited for Yukinoshita to come back that day, but she'd returned shortly before it was time to go home, and in the end, we'd barely talked before parting ways.

But our club's activities went on unchanged. There was nothing new in what we did or in the clubroom. I read as usual or sat around.

Arriving at the clubroom, I put my hand on the door and casually opened it. "'Sup."

My short greeting made Yuigahama jerk her head up from the desk. "Hikki, you're late!"

"Oh, I had some stuff to do. Sorry," I said as I pulled out a chair.

A quiet voice came to me from the diagonal direction, a seat a little off from her usual position. "I don't mind. It's not as if we're particularly busy," Yukinoshita said, her manner the same as usual. Her tone was entirely calm, her gaze on the paperback in her hands, and her fingertip slow as it turned the pages.

Though Yuigahama had complained, more or less, it seemed she was at loose ends, as she began tapping on her phone again. "Well, it's true we don't have anything to do."

"Isn't that fine?" I said. "They say there's no leisure for the poor, so it's good to have free time. Well, then that makes the unemployed of the world the real wealthy class and winners at life. Get a job and you lose, it's true."

"That opinion is very much like you," Yukinoshita said, voice quiet as she turned a page of her paperback.

I took out my book again and opened up to a page I wouldn't read.

"School is almost over, huh?" Yuigahama said out of nowhere,

before clapping her hands as if she'd come up with something. "Oh, let's have a party on Christmas, come on! I wanna have a pizza."

"You can eat that at any time, Yuigahama," Yukinoshita said, reading as usual.

Yuigahama looked puzzled. "Huh? Really? We only get it on special days at home, though…"

"Well," I interjected, "we only ever order it on special days, too. Like during typhoons or heavy snow days."

"It's your family that's special, Hikki… I feel sorry for the delivery people…"

But still, for those delivery people, it's their job, and somebody's gotta do it. If you're going to resent anything, I'd prefer to resent that which is work. Anyway, I did more or less have a counterargument.

"It's worse for them around Christmas and stuff when they have tons of orders. Deliberately ordering on a day when it seems they wouldn't have too many is being considerate."

"I dunno… Hmm…" Yuigahama's face said she wasn't convinced, but she eventually came to a sudden realization. "Oh! Yeah! That's why we'll have a party! Come on, like at your place, Yukinon."

"That would be wonderful… But I'm sorry, I've decided to return home this winter," Yukinoshita said.

So Yuigahama made another suggestion. "Oh, is that right? So then we could go somewhere else instead."

"All right. I still don't quite know my family's plans, though," Yukinoshita said, and I could have sworn I saw her smile at Yuigahama.

"…Oh, then once you know."

What had Yuigahama thought when she saw that smile?

The setting sun was already disappearing into the distant ocean. All that remained in the sky was the afterglow, with no brightness to be seen, only the dreary pining for the day that was gone.

"The days have gotten shorter, haven't they…?" Yukinoshita murmured. It seemed she'd been looking out the window, like me.

It was almost winter solstice. The dark nights had grown slowly, gradually longer lately, dragging out so long it felt as if they'd never dawn.

"Let's call it a day," Yukinoshita announced, closing her book to put it in her bag. We nodded and stood.

The whole week went on like this.

Yukinoshita looked the same as before the school field trip.

No—she was acting so things would be the same, so they wouldn't change, so they would be like this. I think we all knew that.

She was quiet, but she would properly respond to our comments and questions and occasionally smile softly at Yuigahama. But it was the worst kind of smile, as if remembering someone departed or looking at a small child, that sort wistful smile over something that couldn't be undone. Something painful to see.

But I couldn't blame her for it.

Because Yuigahama and I had been going along with it. We'd been firing off conversations one after another, forcing out stupid remarks in an attempt to bury the silence.

This time was superficial, empty, and meaningless, just sliding sideways. This was the purely superficial pretense of frienship that she and I should have hated most of all.

Over the course of nearly a month, I believed this was what I'd acquired.

Once more, I asked myself the question I'd already gone over so many times: Was I wrong?

Had I just been wallowing in this plan I'd been so proud of, swept away by my own ideas, drunk on myself? Had there been something else I should have been doing instead of putting together that scheme?

But I still could never come up with an answer, and the cause for that had to be me.

I'd been called a monster of reason.

But logic is the opposite of emotion.

So didn't that mean she'd told me a monster of reason won't understand feelings—that it was inferior, something less than human that won't see people as people, continually imprisoned by its own consciousness?

Right before I left the clubroom, I turned back.

Though it was the same people there, it felt like a completely different place.

It didn't smell like tea anymore.

X X X

Let's just say…

This is hypothetical.

If you could load only one old save file, like in a video game, to make new decisions, would that change your life?

The answer is no.

That route is only possible for people with choices. For those who never had any choice from the start, this speculation is completely meaningless.

Therefore, I have no regrets.

Or to be more accurate, just about everything in my life is a regret.

In the end, what was it that I'd actually wanted to protect?

Afterword

Good evening, this is work. Whoops, my bad! I made a mistake, there! Work has been so brutal for me, the characters for "Wataru Watari" looked like *work*. Hello and good evening, this is Wataru Watari.

Lately, I've been so occupied with business, I don't meet people outside work. I hardly answer the e-mails, phone calls, or invitations to drinking parties that I occasionally receive. Well, the excuse *I'm busy with work* is pretty convenient for avoiding anything annoying, so I find myself using it a lot, though. When I actually want to go, I will drop work to do it after all!

Everyone tells this lie—to others and to themselves. Well though, you know, me being busy isn't at all a lie—it's just reality.

But sometimes when I promise something with sincerity, it will ultimately end up becoming a lie. I'll go and say, *Tomorrow? I've got plenty of time, gwa-ha-ha!* and then later calmly say, …*Can you make it next week?* Even if it's not my intention, and even if I don't say it out loud, sometimes it will end up becoming a lie.

That's why everyone—and of course I include myself, the author—lies. Or maybe it becomes a lie when someone determines your words are false.

Therefore, you shouldn't readily declare, *I'll finish writing it early next time for sure, fwa-ha-ha!* Keep your mouth shut and don't talk. Some things can only be communicated that way. The judgment of whether what you communicated was a lie or the truth will be yielded to the receiving end, though.

And so this has been *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I Expected*, Volume 8. Well then, let's meet again in Volume 9! Buuut that might be a lie, huh? Kidding! Tee-hee!

And below, the acknowledgments.

Th-this part isn't a lie, okay?!

Ponkan⑧: Thank you so much for doing this work alongside the illustration collection! It's great! It really feels like, *This is the*

heroine! Wonderful as always! Thank you very much!

My editor, Hoshino: I know I've caused a lot of trouble for you with my hellish progress. It's like, you know, don't get the wrong idea. It was late because, like…i-it's not my fault! Society is at fault. Thank you very much!

Everyone who contributed to the illustration collection: I'm so very glad you've drawn this new side of the world and characters of *Oregairu*. All the illustrations are amazing and have brought happiness to my eyes and heart. They've healed my blue light–induced eyestrain. Thank you so much.

And to all my readers: I'm very sorry for the long wait since Volume 7. Thanks to your encouragement, I've been able to keep writing the series. Thank you very much. The off-course wanderings of this teen romantic comedy will continue on a little longer. I hope very much you will stick with me to the end.

Now then, I've about hit my max page count here, so I will lay down my pen.

On a certain day in October, blown around in the cold night wind, while sipping *hooot* MAX Coffee,

Wataru Watari

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Translation Notes

Chapter 1 … Needless to say, **Komachi Hikigaya**'s wrath is there.

1 "What? Are you Mameshiba or something?" Mameshiba is a character that's both a dog and a green bean, and its routine involves popping out in weird places to say, "Hey, did you know?" before inserting weird facts.

2 "Or maybe she's Hakoiri-Neko, since she's sheltered. Or no, she might be Rice Monster Pappu, since we're eating right now. There's no way she could be TapuTapu the Panda…" Hakoiri-Neko (cat in a box), Gohan Kaijuu Pappu (rice monster Pappu), and TapuTapu the Panda (flabby panda) are all names of various other mascot characters that feature in animated shorts similar to Mameshiba. *Hakoiri*, literally meaning "in a box," also refers to a child who's lived a sheltered lifestyle.

3 "Though I doubted there would be any tea stems floating to the surface…" A tea stem floating up to the top of your tea is considered an auspicious sign.

4 "*Autumn has deepened…*" This haiku, "Aki Fukaki," is by Matsuo Basho (1644–1694), the most famous poet of the Edo period.

5 "How beautiful it is to have good friends" refers to the name of a famous 1951 painting of vegetables by Saneatsu Mushanokoji, artist and writer of the Taisho and Showa periods.

Chapter 2 … For some reason, **Iroha Isshiki** smells of danger.

1 "*What kind of pop-idol story is this?*" *Otaku*-oriented idol groups like AKB48 are run by fan popularity polls, so who gets into a music video, for example, is based on voting.

2 "…mistake due to one's youth…" The particular wording of this line is a reference to a quote from Char Aznable in the original *Mobile Suit Gundam* anime.

3 "Even Grander Musashi doesn't get bites like that…" Musashi is the titular hero of the fishing manga *Grander Musashi*.

4 "By *we*, she must have meant the election management committee, not that old Nintendo console." The original Japanese gag here was a pun on the abbreviation for *election management committee* (*senkan*) and *battleship*, referencing the ships Mutsu, Nagato, and Kongou, popularized by the Kantai Collection games, of which the author is a noted fan.

Chapter 3 … **Haruno Yukinoshita** is thoroughly unfathomable.

1 "Pedaling away as I hummed, 'Princess, princess, princess'…" This is from the fictional opening to the fictional anime *Love Hime* from the cycling anime *Yowamushi Pedal*.

2 Animate is a general *otaku* goods chain, while **Tora no Ana** is more specialized in comics and also sells *doujinshi*.

3 "You have to value your teatime, you know?" is a quote from the character Kongou in *Kantai Collection*.

4 "…if they're hurt by some minor thing someone said, eating something sweet'll make them happy." This is a rephrasing of a line from the titular song "The Idolmaster" from the Idolmaster franchise.

5 "Perfect superhuman," or "perfect *choujin*," is a reference to a certain set of *choujin* from the manga *Kinnikuman*, or *Ultimate Muscle*.

6 "What the heck is 'I donuts you'?" This is a line from "Donuts Song" by Tatsuro Yamashita, a pop song from the 1990s.

7 "A pose like a certain commander" refers to Gendo Ikari's iconic pose in *Evangelion.* Hikigaya also adds a cutesy way of saying *commander* used by Yukikaze in the Kantai Collection games.

8 "It's what they call servant service." *Servant x Service* is a slice-of-life anime and manga about public servants working in a government office building in a fictional city in Hokkaido.

9 "In order to do a Tribute Summon…" Hachiman is referring to the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* trading card game in which the player sends a monster to the Graveyard to summon a higher-level monster.

10 "What's up with that? Is it a greeting, like 'meowning'?" *Nyanpasu* (sometimes translated as "meowning") is the nonsense word that Renge Miyauchi uses to greet people in *Non Non Biyori.*

11 Kadokawa is the name of another light-novel publisher and rival to Gagaga Bunko, which publishes this series.

12 "…*Silver Spoon*-ish kibble they say makes cats come running…" *Silver Spoon* is a manga about farming and raising farm animals. "Cats come running" is the slogan for the Kal Kan brand of cat food.

Chapter 4 … Quietly, **Yukino Yukinoshita** resolves herself.

1 "Nwhooaaaaa! This medishine is shoo gooood!" This is what's known as Misakura language, as featured in *hentai* manga

by the artist Misakura Nankotsu. It involves a lot of slurring and extended vowels.

Chapter 5 … Right to the end, **Hayato Hayama** just can't understand it.

1 **"If we're talking about Saturday, it's gotta be about that. It's the day before Super Hero Time."** Super Hero Time is a time slot on TV on Sundays mostly for *tokusatsu* shows from the *Kamen Rider* and *Super Sentai* series.

2 **"…he must have been talking about *Jewelpet Sunshine* and *Pretty Rhythm*."** *Jewelpet Sunshine* and *Pretty Rhythm* (a Sanrio-created cute animal show and an anime based off an arcade game series, respectively) are both shows typically for young girls.

3 **"*Going to hang out*? That was no one I know."** This is riffing off a line from Akagi in *Kantai Collection*. She says, "Reppuu? That's no one I know."

4 **"This wonder trade thing is such a godly system—and so kind to loners."** Introduced in *Pokémon X and Y*, a Wonder Trade is a feature that allows players to trade a Pokémon with a random player online.

5 **"It's aaautooomaaatiiic."** These words are from the hook in Utada Hikaru's song "Automatic" on her 1999 debut album, *First Love*.

6 **"I couldn't even become Saran wrap. Nor could I become Baran and fire off Draura."** The Japanese pun here is on *jinzou baran*, which is the plastic fake grass included in boxed sushi combos and is used to separate items in boxed lunches. Ryuumajin Baran is a character from the manga *Dragon Quest: The Adventure of Dai*, and Draura is one of his signature spells.

7 **"I wasn't really going for the *yamato nadeshiko* thing."** The

y*amato nadeshiko* (*yamato* being an old word for the Japanese people, and a *nadeshiko* being a type of flower) is the traditional ideal of Japanese femininity; she is demure and always walks a few steps behind her husband. This idea is considered old-fashioned.

8 **"…and they just simply exist. Please do not expect too much out of them."** This is a parody of the opening message of *Minami-ke*: "This story is a simple illustration of the three sisters of the Minami household. Please do not expect too much out of it."

9 **"…Miroku Bodhisattva in the half-lotus position…"** Sitting with his right elbow leaning on one knee, right hand posed in a sign, his right leg crossed over his left, which is hanging straight down.

10 **"…the movie thief began his wiggly dance."** The movie thief (*eiga dorobo*) is a character wearing a suit with a video camera for a head that is ubiquitous in Japanese movie theaters, appearing in advertisements warning people against piracy.

11 **"…like they might tell you in *Hot-Dog Press*."** *Hot-Dog Press* is a defunct magazine for young men that was once a popular source of dating advice.

12 ***"I—I hope my clown act was good for you…(eyes rolling back)"*** The "I hope it was good for you" bit is a line from an adult video called *A Midsummer Night's Lewd Dream* (*Manatsu no Yoru no Inmu*) in a gay porn series that ended up being made into a meme.

13 **"Why am I doing a mystery tour in my own hometown, *non*?"** Adding *non* to the end of sentences is the verbal tic that Renge uses in the *Non Non Biyori* manga series.

14 **"Man, Nanpa Street is a horrible name, huh? There's also a bridge called Nanpa Bridge…"** *Nanpa* means both "shipwreck"

and “picking up girls.”

15 ***“Even if you come to hate me, please don’t hate Saizeriya!”*** This is a play off a quote from the celebrity Atsuko Maeda, former AKB48 member, who said, “Even if you come to hate me, please don’t hate AKB!” when she left the group.

Chapter 6 … And so **Yui Yuigahama** declares.

1 “…the l’Cie of the Pulse fal’Cie would cause the Purge, and Cocoon would…” This line is in reference to *Final Fantasy XIII*, a game notorious for having a confusing plot if the player does not read the in-game dictionary (or the spinoff novels).

Chapter 7 … Needless to say, **Komachi Hikigaya**’s kindness is there.

1 “…so this was probably not love but *Nisekoi: False Love*.” Referring to the romantic comedy manga *Nisekoi* by Naoshi Komi.

2 “I could be at ease, build my Gundam, and fight!” The Japanese uses all English words here, making it clear this is referring to *Gundam Build Fighters* (whose Japanese title is also in English).

3 “*Order whatever you like, be it peperoncino or Pepelotion.*” Pepelotion is a brand of lube.

4 “…Kawaguchiko? No, was it Yamanakako?” Both of these are the names of lakes in Japan.

5 “…like it’s kill or be killed or *Kill la Kill*…” *Kill la Kill* is an anime about students who wear clothes that give them special abilities, and in some cases, the clothes are sentient as well.

6 The Meat to the Tigers Plot is referencing the Chinese epic *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The adage instructs people to

throw one piece of meat to two tigers so they fight each other instead.

7 **The Empty Fort Strategy** is from the Chinese *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, an essay on politics and war. It involves using reverse psychology to deceive the enemy into thinking an empty location is full of traps and ambushes to induce them to retreat.

8 **"…now that it's come to this, with our backs to the river…"** "With our backs to the river" means, idiomatically, "with our backs to the wall" but is in reference to the Battle of Jingxing, also known as the Battle of Tao River, between the armies of Han and Zhao.

9 **"Just like Gen after he was told, 'You're wheat! Become wheat!' he straightened his back once more."** Gen is the protagonist of *Barefoot Gen*, a manga about a child surviving through World War II and the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. Gen is told to become wheat because it straightens up again and again, no matter how many times it's trampled, and this is used as a metaphor for resilience in the face of adversity.

10 **"Silence, you!"** This is a famous line from Kong Ming in the 1967–1971 *Suikoden* manga by Mitsuteru Yokoyama (an adaptation of the Chinese classic *Water Margin / Shuihu Zhuàn*).

11 **"I am Sun Tzu, I am Sun Tzu…I'm some zoo? In other words, rather than fighting, the wisdom of victory can be found at the Chiba Zoo, huh…?"** The original Japanese gag here is a play on the fact that the kanji for "Sun Tzu" and "Abiko city," a city in Chiba prefecture, are identical. He says, "In other words, the fact that Abiko city exists means that Chiba won without fighting, huh…?"

12 **"…maybe it'd be nice not to be bound by the rule that is civil code volume 4, article 2."** This is the section of Japanese law that restricts marriage to legally only be between a man and a woman.

13 "No man is above the law…" *Hou no Shikaku* (Blind spot of the law) is the Japanese title for the Steven Seagal movie *Above the Law*.

14 "The duels of the strongest duelists are always fated. A duelist can even create the cards they draw." This is referring to the Shining Draw card in *Yu-Gi-Oh!* which the protagonist of *ZEXAL* uses several times to draw the card he needs during a duel.

15 "'Tis what I assumed you meant, *ding, ding*!" Zaimokuza is imitating the manner of speech of the titular character of *Ninja Hattori-kun*. He ends his sentences with the typical ninja *de gozaru*, a somewhat archaic version of the verb for "to be." He also adds the meaningless *nin, nin!* which is sometimes translated as "*ding, ding!*"

Chapter 8 … When the time is ripe, **Hachiman Hikigaya** makes his speech.

1 "I'm really getting used as a pretext here. You might as well paste me in at the beginning of this book." The original Japanese pun here is on the word *dashi*, which both means "soup stock" and "pretext." He says, "It wouldn't be strange for me to be lined up with kombu and *katsuo*," which are seaweed and fish flakes, ingredients used for making soup broth.

2 "What is this, Ramenman?" Ramenman is a character from *Kinnikuman / Ultimate Muscle*. One of his nicknames is Instant Death Dealer.

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